

KIDDIES

— J. J. BELL —



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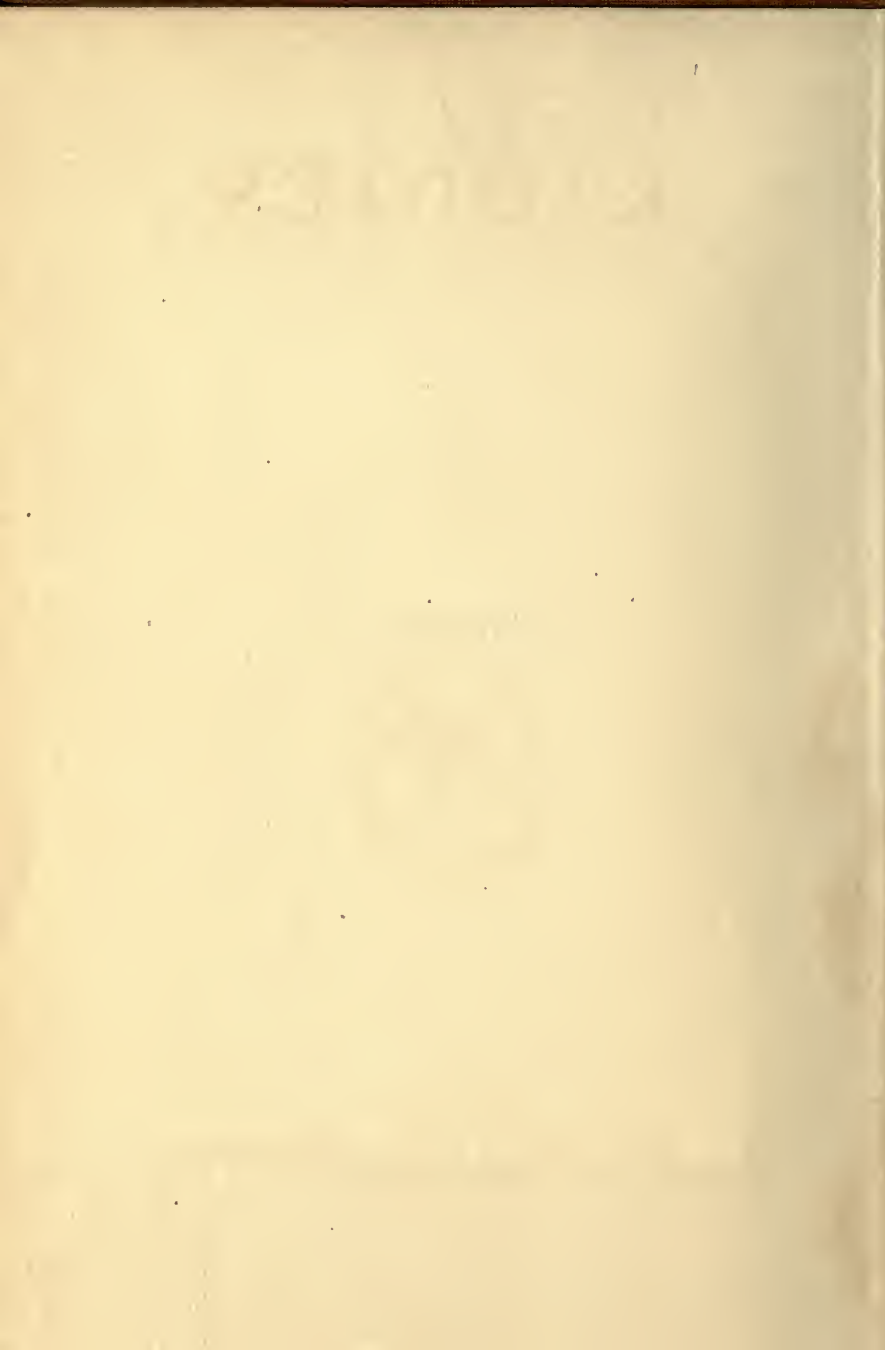
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KIDDIES



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BY

J. J. BELL

AUTHOR OF

"WEE MACGREGOR," "JIM CROW," "BOBBY," ETC.



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TO
MISS BINKIE BELL,
WITH LOVE

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Gift

CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. HABAKKUK	I
II. LITTLE BOY	12
III. SOME ADVANTAGES OF BEING AN AUNT	31
IV. THE GOOD FAIRY	40
V. THE ANSWER	51
VI. JOCK	62
VII. MR. LOGIE'S HEART	77
VIII. THE LIMIT	94
IX. THE GHOST	107
X. AN EARLY ENGAGEMENT	126
XI. DICKY JOHNNY	139
XII. SILK STOCKINGS AND SUÈDES	167
XIII. THE GNOME	188
XIV. FOR A GOOD BOY	204
XV. MR. JOHN CAW'S LOVE AFFAIR	229
XVI. THE UGLY UNCLE	249
XVII. THE LITTLE TYRANT	266

KIDDIES

I

HABAKKUK

"PAW," said the boy, across the table, "d'ye ken what I'm gaun to be, when I'm a man?"

His father lowered the evening paper which he had been reading by the fireside. "What are ye gaun to be, Macgregor?" he inquired, with an interested smile.

"I'm gaun to be a plumber!"

"I thocht ye was gaun to be a penter, ma mannie." Said the boy's mother, pausing in the process of threading a needle: "Ye'll never be a plumber, nor a penter, nor onything else, Macgregor, if ye dinna pey attention to yer lessons. Keep yer e'e on yer book, an' dinna let me hear ye cheep again till the clock strikes." Turning to her husband: "Ye shouldna encourage him to speak, John, when he should be learnin' his lessons."

"Aw, the wean's fine," said John mildly. "There's nae harm in speakin' aboot what he's gaun to be, when he's a man. I mind, when I was a laddie like him, I——"

"Ye dinna need to learn lessons to be a plumber," Macgregor remarked, incited, doubtless, by his father's partisanship.

"Haud yer tongue!" his mother commanded. "Ye'll

never get on at anything in this world wi'oot eddication."

"Deed, ay," assented Mr. Robinson; "yer maw's richt there, Macgregor. If ye dinna ken hoo mony beans mak' five——"

"I ken that fine! I ken what six times nine is!"

"Dod, ye bate me there!" laughed John, while his wife frowned, and said:

"Ye micht keep yer eegnorance to yersel', man. . . . What's six times nine, Macgregor?"

"Forty-five."

John took up his newspaper.

"Aweel," said Lizzie, who would fain have checked the figures on her fingers. "I daursay yer richt, but I didna think ye wud ha'e kent it. But ye'll need mair nor sums to get ye on at the plumbin' or onything else ye try. Ye maun be able to read an' write an' spell——"

"I can spell plenty words, maw. I can spell Habakkuk!"

"Ay: efter yer Granpaw Purdie was near a week learnin' ye!"

There was a brief pause ere Macgregor inquired, "Can *you* spell Habakkuk, maw?"

From behind his paper Mr. Robinson said, a trifle unsteadily: "It'll be handy to be able to spell Habakkuk when ye're a plumber, Macgregor, for ye micht get a customer o' the same name, an' folk wi' fancy names dinna like to see them spelt wrang."

"I thocht a Habakkuk was a bird, or a fish," said the boy. "What wey——"

John guffawed.

"Whisht!" cried Lizzie, "ye should think shame o' yerself, makin' fun o' a name that's in the Bible, John, an' roarin' and laughin' as if ye wanted to wauken wee Jeanie. . . . Macgregor, if ye dinna improve

at yer lessons, ye'll no' get bidin' wi' yer Granpaw Purdie at the New Year."

"I'm no' wantin' to bide wi' him at the New Year, when Aunt Purdie's there. I wisht Aunt Purdie wud break her leg or——"

"Haud yer tongue, ye bad laddie! But yer Aunt Purdie'll no' be there. She's gaun to a hydropatho, or some sic place, wi' some o' her gran' genteel acquaintances——"

"She'll be gaun to veesit the King next," observed Mr. Robinson. "It's a peety I'm no' in the proveesion trade, Lizzie——"

"What wey are ye no' in the proveesion trade, paw?" asked Magreegor.

"Dinna answer him, John," said Lizzie, "or he'll never get his lessons done the nicht."

"I'll gang to Granpaw Purdie's," said her son.

"Ye'll no' gang a step if ye dinna learn yer lessons. Ha'e ye learnt onything the nicht?"

"I've learnt ma—ma poetry. What's the use o' poetry to a plumber?"

John checked a guffaw in time.

"Everything's o' some use," said his wife. "Gi'e me the book, an' I'll hear ye yer poetry."

"I dinna need to be heard it."

"Gi'e me the book! . . . Noo, Macgreegor!"

"I—I've jist to say the first verse."

"Weel, say it!"

"'Not a drum was heard,' " mumbled Macgregor.

"I canna hear ye."

"'Not a drum was heard,' maw."

"Weel, what else?"

"'Not a—not a funeral shot'——"

"Ye're wrang!—John, ye're no' to tell him!"

"I wisht I could! A nice cheery pome for a wean, that!"

"Come awa', Macgregor. What comes efter 'funeral'?"

"I meant for to say 'note,' maw."

"Weel, what next?"

"'Not a soldier . . . hurried' . . ."

With a sigh Mrs. Robinson passed back the book. "Nae wonder ye're aye at the foot o' the cless," she remarked with sad severity.

"Maybe I wudna ha'e been foot the day, if Wullie Thomson hadna been absent."

"Tits! Dinna let me hear ye say anither word till ye've learnt it."

"I wisht I had ma holidays," said Macgregor, glowering at the page. "I wisht they wud get measles or something in the schule, an' then it wud be closed. I wisht——"

"Whisht! I've a rale guid mind to gi'e ye lessons masel' in yer holidays——"

"Ye couldna!"

"Macgregor!" exclaimed John, with some sternness in his voice.

"Poetry's awfu' ill to remember," said the boy.

"Ma laddie, if ye canna remember a wee bit poetry like that," Lizzie observed, "I wudna like to trust ye for a plumber. Ye wud be forgettin' hauf yer tools, an' puttin' the water in the gas-pipes, an' the gas in the——"

"I wudna!" he protested.

"I doobt yer maw's richt, Macgregor," put in John over his paper. "I've heard it said that learnin' poetry's a gran' exercise for the mem'ry. An' a plumber's no' muckle guid wantin' a mem'ry, though I've come across some wi' terrible sma' yins—or maybe it was their consciences that was sma'. Onywey yer maw's richt, ma mannie, so jist you wire into yer poetry——"

Lizzie beamed upon her man. "D'ye hear what yer paw says, Macgregor?"

"A' the same," continued John, "if I was yer mais-ter, I wud gi'e ye something cheerier nor that to learn. It's no' the thing for a wean——"

"Aw, whisht, John," said his wife, "or ye'll jist spile a' ye said afore. . . . Come awa', laddie; see hoo quick ye can learn it, an' ye'll get a biled egg to yer tea the morn's nicht."

"If ye fry it an' let me gang to Granpaw Purdie's, I'll learn the poetry," said her son.

"Ah, weel, learn it, an' we'll see. Oh, mercy!" Lizzie rose abruptly. "There's wee Jeanie wauken. I'll ha'e to gang to her. I doobt she's got a touch o' the cauld. She's that restless. John, see if you an' Macgregor canna haud yer tongues for ten meenutes." And, taking a spoon and bottle with her, she departed to the other room.

"Jeanie's gaun to get ile!" Macgregor observed in a hoarse whisper.

"Learn yer poetry, ma mannie, an' try if ye canna be ready to say it when yer maw comes back. It'll please her."

"Ay," said Macgregor. "D'ye think she couldna spell Habakkuk, paw? I'll ask her when she comes back."

After a moment's hesitation—"Och, she could spell it easy," said John. "Yer maw was aye a famous spell-er. But never heed aboot Habakkuk the noo——"

"Wha was Habakkuk; what did he dae?"

"Aw, ye best speir at yer granpaw, when ye see him."

"I wudna like to be ca'ed Habakkuk. What was his ither name?"

"That'll dae, that'll dae. Attend to yer poetry."

Macgregor bent over his book, and John lit his pipe. A short silence ensued.

"Paw, Jeanie's gettin' ile—I hear her."

"Weel, dinna listen. Ye wudna like onybody to be listenin' if you was gettin' ile."

"They wudna hear onything. I dinna mak' noises. . . . Paw!"

"What?"

"Will ye be pleased if I learn ma poetry?"

"Deed, ay, Macgreegor."

"Will ye be *awfu'* pleased?"

"Ay."

"Will ye be that pleased that ye'll gi'e me a penny, paw?"

Mr. Robinson frowned, then laughed. "We'll see about that. But if ye can say the poetry rale weel——"

"I'll learn it!"

"That's the richt sort o' laddie! Wire in, an' I'll awa' an' see hoo yer wee sister's gettin' on. I'm vexed to hear her cryin' like that."

"It's jist the ile. If ye was gettin' her some sweeties——" The boy looked expectant.

"Na, na. Yer maw doesna want sweeties in the hoose excep', maybe, on Seturdays."

John left the room rather hurriedly. He had discovered in his watch-pocket a solitary peppermint lozenge, and while anxious to convey solace to his little daughter, he was glad of an excuse to have a word with his wife.

"Lizzie," he said in a low tone, when Jeanie's sobs had subsided under the fragrant influence of the lozenge, "Lizzie, can ye spell Habakkuk?"

"*What?*"

"I'm askin' ye, can ye spell Habakkuk?"

"What for?" Lizzie was feeling tired. "I'm no' heedin' about yer bit jokes the noo, John." She sat

down on the edge of the bed. "Awa' back to the kitchen, an' let me put the wee lassie to sleep. Puir doo! Had she to get nesty ile, the dearie, had she? But she'll be a' better in the mornin', she will that! Noo she's gaun to put her handy-pandies ablow the blankets, an' her maw'll tell her a wee story about a——"

"But, Lizzie, it's no' a joke. D'ye think ye could manage to spell Habakkuk, if I asked ye?"

"No' if the King asked me! Ye ken I was never ony use at the spellin'——"

"Could ye no *learn* to spell it, Lizzie? Ye see, I'm feart Macgregor asks ye to spell it. I was tellin' the laddie ye was a famous speller, an' it wudna be very nice for you or me if ye couldna spell the word. Ye wudna like it yersel', wife."

"Oh, mercy!" she groaned. "Hoo dae ye spell it, John?"

"Me! I could as sune spell Nebycanezzar! But I'll get ye the Bible, an' ye can learn it afore ye show face ben the hoose."

"Ay, that's it, John! Bring the Bible, though I doobt if I'll mind the spellin' ten meenutes efter——"

"Aw, Lizzie!" he cried in sudden dismay.

"What is't, John?"

"D'ye no' mind, we left the twa Bibles in the kirk on Sunday? There's jist a New Testament in the hoose, an Habakkuk's in the Auld. . . . What's to be done? It's ower late to buy a Bible."

Mechanically patting the drowsy child, Mrs. Robinson remained silent.

"If ye hadna been sae sharp wi' Macgregor about his lessons——" began John.

"If ye had stopped him speakin' about Habakkuk instead o' makin' fun——"

"A Bible no' the kin' o' thing I wud like to be askin'

the len' o' frae ma neebours," said John gloomily reflective. "They wud think we was either awfu' bad or else unco guid. . . . If I kent onybody that could spell the word, I wud gang to him an' bet him saxpence he couldna dae it. . . . But then I couldna tell if he was richt, an' I wud loss ma saxpence either wey."

"It wudna be seemly to bet aboot the name o' yin o' the prophets o' the Auld Testament. But I—I wish Habakkuk had been left oot," said Lizzie irritably. "Ma fayther used to spell it to us when we was weans, but I canna mind hoo he done it. I wisht I had payed attention when he was learnin' it to Macgregor. Maybe the laddie'll ha'e forgot a' aboot it by this time."

"Weans never forget the things ye want them to forget. Macgregor'll maybe forget to ask ye the nicht, but as sure's death he'll ask ye afore long. Could ye no' *try* to spell it, Lizzie?—an' I'll tell ye if it soun's kin' o' correct. It begins wi' an' 'H.'"

"Aw, I ken that much. An' then there's an 'A' . . . But is't wan 'B' or twa 'B's'?"

"Dear knows! Try it wi' twa, woman."

"H-A-B-B—weel, what next?"

"'I' . . . That gi'es ye Habbi. Noo for the 'kuk.'"

"Kuk," she murmured thoughtfully, "kuk—kuk——"

John laughed.

"What's ado?" she asked crossly.

"I couldna help it, Lizzie—ye was that like a hen! Wud ye start wi' a 'c'? Eh?"

"'C,'" said Lizzie, "C-U-C-K. . . . D'ye think that could be richt?"

"Try it a'thegither noo."

"H-A-B-B-I-C-U-C-K."

John shook his head. "It seems kin' o' queer."

"But it's a queer kin' o' name."

"Ay; but I doobt——"

"Weel, spell it yersel'!" she said smartly.

John sighed. "I've a guid mind," he said presently, "to gang doon to the druggist's an' telephone to the meenister."

"Man, he wud think ye had gaed daft, or ye was the worse o' drink."

"I duarsay he wud," John admitted wearily, "though it wud be his business to inform me. Ha'e ye nae notion yersel', Lizzie?"

She did not reply. The simplest way out had long ago occurred to both, but John would not have taken it, and Lizzie would not have asked him to do so. They had always dealt straightly with their boy.

The sound of a chair pushed back reached their ears, and a little later Macgregor put his head into the room. "Maw, I can say ma poetry noo."

"A' richt, dearie. I'll be ben in twa-three meenutes," said his mother. "Wee Jeanie's near sleepin' noo. Learn yer—learn something else till I'm ready."

"I'll learn ma spellin'," said Macgregor, and retired.

"I wish *we* could learn oor spellin'," said John, with a rueful grin. "Dod, Lizzie, I wudna like him to think ye couldna spell Habakkuk. I wudna care for masel', but he thinks *you* ken everything. Is there naething I can dae?"

She shook her head. "There's nae use speirin' at folk, for ye cudna believe unless ye seen the word in print. An' I wudna ha'e onybody think we hadna a Bible in the hoose. Macgreegor'll jist ha'e to fin' oot that his maw canna spell Habakkuk. Nae doobt, as he grows aulder, he'll fin' oot plenty o' things his maw canna dae. I wisht ye hadna said onything aboot

it, John. I wudna ha'e mindit, if I hadna kent it was comin'."

"I done it for the best when I warned ye, wife," he returned, in deep dejection. "I done it for the best."

"I believe that. But we'll jist ha'e to seem to be amused-like when he asks me, an' I canna spell it. Maybe ye wud hear him his lessons—espaycially his spellin', the nicht, John; an'—an' maybe ye could get his mind awa' frae onything like what we've been speakin' aboot. D'ye see?"

"I'll try," said John.

In a little while he went back to the kitchen.

"I'll hear ye yer poetry," he said as cheerfully as possible.

"Is maw no' comin' to hear me?" the boy asked.

"Ye can say it to me for a change."

"An' ye'll tell her I could say it, so I'll get ma fried egg, paw?"

"Deed, ay! Noo fire awa'."

Macgregor got through the stanza with as few stumbles as the average small boy would have incurred.

"Ye could say it better, if ye tried harder," said his father.

"I daursay I could. . . . Are ye gaun to hear me ma spellin'?"

"If ye ken it."

"Ay; I ken it."

At the end of ten minutes Mr. Robinson closed the book. "I was never great on the spellin' masel'," he observed, "but I think I could ha'e done a wee thing better nor that when I was your age, ma mannie! Ye'll ha'e to——"

"Could ye spell Habakkuk when ye was ma age, paw?"

"I'm sayin' ye'll ha'e to rise in the mornin' an' gang

ower the words again. An' noo, what else ha'e ye got to dae. Ha'e ye ony meanin's o' words?"

"We dinna get meanin's when we get poetry. There's jist the readin'. Ye dinna need to hear me that."

"Ay, I'll hear ye."

Presently, "Ye're no' sic a bad reader," said John, looking gratified. "Ha'e ye done yer sums?"

"Ay; but ye're no' allowed to help me wi' them."

"I ken that. It's maybe jist as weel." John relit his pipe and wondered what he could tell to entertain his son.

"Paw," said Macgregor, "let's hear ye try to spell Habakkuk."

"Aw, never heed about auld Habby the noo. D'ye ken, I was readin' in the paper aboot a ship——"

Just then Lizzie entered.

"Ha'e ye feenished yer lessons, Macgregor?" she inquired, sitting down with her seam and heaving a sigh.

"Ay," replied John. "An' he's earned that fried egg! I was gaun to tell him aboot a ship that struck a——"

"Maw, can *you* spell——"

"—a rock, an' afore the captain could——"

"—Habakkuk?"

"Never heed, John, ye canna save me," said Lizzie resignedly. "I doobt, dearie, ye'll ha'e to tell me hoo to spell it."

Macgregor smiled. "Ay; I'll spell it to ye. H-A-B-A-K-U-K. . . . Habakkuk!"

"Fine," said Lizzie gently.

"Splendid!" ejaculated John, trying to look happy.

"It's a gey hard word to spell," Macgregor remarked, with not a little complacence. "I was feart ye wudna manage it."

II

LITTLE BOY

I

BILLY sat in the sunshine, a small hatless figure in clothing very black against the whiteness of the lodge steps. A book, open at a coloured picture, lay across his knees, but it had evidently ceased to interest him, for his gaze strayed from the great gates on his left to the avenue on his right and back again. So it had been straying for about an hour, though, to be sure, he would have told you that "hours and hours" had passed since the great gates had been opened to let out a splendid motor-car containing a smart chauffeur and a rather cross-looking gentleman who stared at him for an instant and returned to reading a newspaper. Immediately the car went through, the gates had been closed by the lodge-keeper, who was Billy's uncle, and whom Billy had not yet got to know very well, except as a terribly tall man who seemed to want to be kind, but didn't exactly know how to go about it. After closing the gates, which he did as though he were fond of them, the uncle had nodded to Billy, saying: "Be a good boy, and see and not get into mischief, and do what your aunt bids ye." Which was just what Billy expected him to say, though he had stayed at the lodge only a week. Then the uncle had gone briskly up the avenue.

Since then nothing at all had happened.

Through the open door behind him Billy heard his

aunt moving about the little house. He heard other sounds also—sounds of washing, scrubbing, sweeping, even the flip of a duster. It seemed to him that his aunt was always cleaning something or telling him not to make something dirty. He was sure he had been very careful since he came to stay with her, and yet the cleaning went on from breakfast-time till supper; sometimes he heard it after he was in bed. Why didn't she let him help her? He had helped his mother about the house when he was only four, and now he was six. But once when he had proffered his services to his aunt she had laughed, not unkindly, saying: "Tits, laddie, run away and play!" And he had nearly replied: "But I've no one to play with"; indeed, he would have said it had not a painful lump come into his throat, warning him that he must "run away" quickly unless he wanted her to see him crying. Billy had not asked himself whether his aunt loved him or not. He took it for granted that she did, for she gave him all the good food he could eat, and a pretty, cosy little bed, and had seemed really sorry when he had fallen off the steps the day after his arrival. But he did wish she would allow him to love her. He had the same feeling about his uncle, but could not think of any way of "helping" him. Still, he would gladly have walked up the avenue with his uncle, who had work in the hot-houses and gardens, and have met him coming home, and have taken his hand, if his uncle had so desired. But his uncle—no, perhaps it was his aunt—had said that Sir Henry and her ladyship would not care about a strange little boy being about the grounds, and that Billy must always be careful to stay near the lodge.

Now had Billy been a little girl he might have been happy enough in the sunshine, with a doll to play with, or a fairy-book to look at, or a "shop" to keep on

the steps (though that would probably have annoyed the owner of the steps), or even a day-dream. But the heart of a little boy is not so self-supporting; it can dance as lightly as a little girl's, only it cannot so readily supply its own tune; left to itself it asks too many questions. Not that Billy particularly craved the company of other children just then; any company, so long as it were kindly, would have satisfied him. In some ways he was "old-fashioned," albeit he still believed in fairies and giants. You—if you were one of those people who are always talking about understanding children (as if that were a simple matter)—would have said that the little boy sitting solitary on those white steps was not a proper boy at all, because he made no attempt at play, because his hands and face were clean and his broad linen collar spotless; you would, possibly, after three minutes' conversation, have called him "girlish," because his eyes were beautiful, his speech soft, his manner gentle, his feelings (if you touched them) intensely sensitive. But probably, were you an ordinary person with any heart worth mentioning, you would simply have wanted to sit down beside Billy and put your arm round him.

Billy had been wearying for something to happen. And nothing had happened. He began to feel lonely. He tried his book again. He could not read, but he knew the stories by heart, and he whispered them over to himself as he turned the familiar pictures. The book was an old friend, but somehow it failed to prove a comforting companion at this time. Perhaps it even made him feel lonelier. You see, his father had bought it for him, and his mother had taught him the stories.

Presently he let it slip from his knee; it fell down the steps upon the gravel. He descended after it, and was about to pick it up, when the painful lump came into his throat. For a moment, his hand to his mouth,

he looked at the open door. Then he turned and ran up the avenue. Only a few yards, but the sob could be contained no longer. He stumbled from the gravel path into the wood. A few yards more and, hidden by a large rhododendron, he let himself fall on the rank grass and dead leaves. And there he cried softly but sorely. Even the heart of a child knoweth its own bitterness.

Yet happily such bitterness though in the heart is not of it, and after a season flows forth with the tears. Billy's weeping came to an end at last, but he was still breathing unevenly when he rose to his knees and rubbed his wet eyes and cheeks with his sleeve, forgetting that he possessed a handkerchief. His grief and his close acquaintance with Mother Earth had not improved his appearance. His countenance was tear-stained, his yellow hair tousled, his hands rather dirty, and there was a grubby mark on his collar. But he did not see or consider these things, and, encouraged by the thought that no one had witnessed him crying, he got upon his feet and looked about him. He felt that he ought to return to the lodge, but something suggested his taking a few steps further into the wood. Perhaps that something was the Spirit of Adventure; at any rate, Billy obeyed the impulse. After a brief halt he took a few steps more. This occurred several times, until he found himself standing on a narrow and apparently little-used footpath.

He trotted along, his heart growing lighter and lighter. Now and then he stopped and stooped to examine fir-cones, but did not touch them, never having seen such things before. Possibly he was relieved that they neither moved nor made noises, and he was careful to avoid treading on them. Until now Billy's existence had been passed in cities and towns, with an occasional trip to the larger seaside resorts, for it was

among crowds that his parents had made a living. A third-rate singer and a fourth-rate fiddler, they had not, perhaps, been very exemplary people, but at least they had loved their little boy devotedly and shielded him from much that was deplorable. They had died of enteric within a week of each other, and after several months of residence with various relatives Billy had been received by his uncle and aunt at the lodge, not without many misgivings on the part of the middle-aged childless couple. But so far the boy had puzzled rather than troubled them.

He had not walked far when he saw before him a high wall. It had a forbidding look, and he would probably have turned back had he not perceived a gate. Also, the gate was made of iron bars; and, as everybody knows, such a gate is so designed in order that little boys may peep through it. Billy, with vague thoughts of a giant's castle, approached the gate on tip-toe and peeped through. Then he was glad he had come.

He gazed upon a big garden—at least, it seemed big to him—with high walls all around it. In the wall opposite was a green door, closed, and at a good distance beyond he saw the upper part of a large house. The walls of the garden were covered with fruit-trees, many in blossom, pink and white, but the garden itself was filled with flowers, and every flower was white. Some of the flowers, especially the narcissus—he knew them as “white lilies”—were familiar to Billy, for he and his mother had sometimes bought them in the London streets. There was a spacious bed of them in the midst of the garden. And on the path around the bed walked a lady in a pale grey dress.

At the first sight of her Billy drew back, but as she did not notice him he drew close to the bars once

more. She was a beautiful lady, and her hair was yellow like his own. She walked slowly, and never raised her eyes from the path, or, it may have been, the narcissus bed. Sometimes she clasped her hands in front of her, and Billy saw little flashes. Sometimes she let them fall by her side. He wondered why she never looked up.

Quite suddenly Billy was reminded of his mother in her last "singing dress." He choked, turned, took two steps, and collapsed, his face hidden on his arms.

The beautiful lady had looked up at last. For a moment it seemed as though she were going to run away. Then, with a pale face, she came swiftly to the gate.

"Little boy, what is the matter?" Her question was scarce more than a whisper.

Amid the sobs that would not be checked came the broken, desperate cry:

"Oh, mother—mother!"

And at that the beautiful lady became paler still and wavered, and clutched at a bar of the gate.

"Wait, little boy; wait till I get the key," she said unsteadily. "The gate has not been opened for so long—so long."

As she ran to a summer-house not far off she repeated the two words with trembling lips.

The rusted lock resisted, but at length she forced the key round and drew the gate open. Billy was struggling to his feet.

"Don't run away—don't be afraid," she said gently, noting the badly-fitting black clothes which Billy was "wearing out" ere he should grow too big for them. "What is the matter? Have you hurt yourself? Did you fall? Tell me, little boy."

"Oh, mother!" he cried again, his face in his hands, his shoulders heaving.

Blindly he turned to go, but her hand fell softly on his arm.

"Little boy," she whispered; and there her voice failed her.

She slipped to her knees, and her arm went round him. She shivered as if with pain.

Then Billy felt himself being drawn close to her—closer yet. He did not resist. He yielded. He allowed her to take his hands from his face. And then his face was at her bosom, and both arms were round him, and a hand was tenderly patting him. While yet he sobbed a most wonderful peace fell upon him, a most exquisite sense of comfort prevailed his heart.

But presently he became aware that the lady was crying too. He didn't know what to do, and he couldn't say anything. But his arms of their own accord went round her as far as they could reach, and clung.

"Little boy—little boy," she whispered.

Later, the beautiful lady invited him into her garden, and Billy, his hand in hers, assented readily, almost blithely.

First they went to the summer-house, at the side of which was a water-tap. With her handkerchief she washed away the tear stains from his face, and afterwards bathed her own eyes.

"For you see, little boy," she said, "we don't wish other people to know we have been crying."

"No; we don't," said Billy.

She asked him his name.

"Billy. I'm six."

He had learned that grown-up people who ask your name always want to know your age also,

"Six!" she said after a little while, and sighed.

"Why are you sorry?" he inquired anxiously.

"Come!" she said, touching his hair. "Would you like to walk round my garden? I want you to tell me about yourself, Billy. How did you find your way here?"

"I was feeling sorry and I just came." He gave her hand a small squeeze. "You was glad to see me, wasn't you, ma'am?"

"I—yes; I was glad to see you. Perhaps you would like to come here and play another morning?"

"Oh!" he cried, "play here—with you? Would *you* play with me?"

Her free hand went to her heart.

"Perhaps," she answered with an effort. "Oh, little boy, little boy, if you only knew! But now"—her voice steadied—"tell me where you came from."

Within the next hour she drew from him his little history.

"And you like staying with your aunt and uncle at the lodge, Billy?"

He nodded. He certainly liked it *now*. But a look of alarm came into his face.

"They'll be angry——" he began in distress.

She understood.

"Shall I come with you and explain? I think I had better. And I could tell your aunt to let you come here in the mornings when you have nothing better to do—until your school-days begin. I am nearly always here in the mornings, when the weather is fine. Sometimes I read and sometimes I sew, and sometimes I just walk about—take care, Billy! Your boot-lace is loose. Shall I tie it for you?"

He could not manage it, so once more she went on her knees to help him. And Billy, his heart overflowing, flung his arms about her neck.

"You're kind; you're just awful kind," he whispered, and was shocked when the lady cried again, holding him to her breast.

But soon she reassured him, promising not to cry the next time he came; and when the troublesome lace had been tied, she rose and gave him her hand, and they set off for the lodge.

So happy days began for Billy. He did not see the beautiful lady every morning, but she always let him know in advance when she would not be in the garden, so that he should never arrive at the gate and be disappointed. In fine weather they played in the garden—at first she did not play particularly well; would stop in the middle of a game and send Billy to the far end of the garden to find a certain kind of flower; but afterwards she did better—and when the weather was not quite fine she read stories to him in the summer-house, where now and then they had a small picnic. Sometimes, too, they played in the wood. And Billy loved her more every day. And she—ah, well, you shall see!

II

The trees were now in full leaf. From the avenue a whispering sound came to Billy sitting on the white steps, for there had been a storm in the night, and though the rain was over, the wind was not yet exhausted. Billy was no longer clad in dingy black; he wore a smart sailor suit with brass buttons. The suit had arrived mysteriously, and his aunt had told Billy to ask no questions, but to wear it and keep it clean, and not think he had got it through any merit of his own; while his uncle had expressed the hope that Billy would always be a good boy, do as he was bid, and not get into mischief.

This morning Billy was chiefly engaged in listening

to the trees, admiring the glint of his buttons in the sunshine, and wishing it had been a "garden day." To-morrow seemed so far away. A drawing-book lay on his knee, but the breeze made the pages flap, and he had given up attempting to copy the squares and oblongs and triangles. From the lodge came the sounds of scrubbing and the slop of a wet cloth, which, however, were now so familiar that he scarcely noticed them. But he pricked up his ears as a humming sound mingled with the whisper of leafage. The sole event of the morning was about to take place.

The lodge-keeper appeared round the corner of the lodge, glanced at his big silver watch, and solemnly proceeded to open the great gates. Billy wished, as he wished every morning, to be allowed to help, but did not like to ask. A minute later the car came gliding down the avenue. Billy prepared to touch his cap—now a nautical affair with H.M.S. Dreadnought on the encircling ribbon—as his uncle had instructed him to do. But his finger stopped in mid-air, for the car, instead of humming past, as it usually did, came to a standstill right before him. Billy's surprise was equalled only by his uncle's.

"Like to come for a ride, boy?" said the rather cross-looking gentleman who was driving.

"What?" cried Billy, astounded, petrified.

"Billy!" began his uncle in a tone of reproof.

The rather cross-looking gentleman signed sharply for silence.

"Come along, Billy," he said pleasantly, so pleasantly indeed that the boy rose, dropping his drawing-book, came down the steps, and clambered into the tonneau.

"That's right!" said the rather cross-looking gentleman. "Will you be all right there alone?"

Billy smiled bravely.

The gentleman motioned to the chauffeur to go be-

hind, then apparently changing his mind, gave up the driving-seat to him, and went behind himself.

"Back about one," he said to the lodge-keeper as the car slipped through the gateway.

"Well, I'm blest!" said the lodge-keeper to himself, and after closing the gates went straightway to his wife.

Billy's blue eyes were big, as the car, gathering speed, spun along the high road, but his wits were coming back. And first of all he remembered that he must be polite. So when he heard a voice asking whether he had ever been in a car before, he replied:

"No, sir."

And when asked if he liked it:

"Yes, sir."

All the same he was not quite comfortable on the leather cushion, gripping the outer edge with both hands; and when the car took a curve he thought he was going, and, with a cry, made a grab at his companion—and missed him. But in the same instant a strong arm was round him, lifting him well on to the seat and holding him there.

"That better?"

"Yes—yes, sir—but please hold me."

The gentleman gave a queer laugh, but held him a trifle tighter. About ten minutes later, the gentleman said:

"Enjoying it—er—Billy?"

"Awful—yes, sir."

After that they spoke very little. About noon they stopped at a farm, where Billy got a glass of milk, and the farmer's wife called him her "bonny boy," and hugged him when he offered to kiss her. It was only the little boys who get plenty of kisses who really object to kissing.

They were nearly home when Billy, glancing up at

his new friend, in whom he had already acquired the utmost confidence, inquired:

"Why are you sorry?"

"Sorry! Why do you think I'm sorry?"

"You look sorry, sir."

"Oh, never mind the 'sir,' Billy. Perhaps I can't help it—perhaps I always look sorry."

"No; you mostly look cross."

"Oh!"

"But not now," said Billy leniently. "Now you look sorry and *nice*."

"My dear little chap!" said the gentleman very softly, but when Billy looked up again, his face was as cross as ever.

Billy could not understand it, but he was not afraid, and moved an inch closer.

"I say, Billy, would you like to come with me again to-morrow morning?" the gentleman asked, when the great gates were in sight.

"Oh, yes, but—but I can't come!" Billy remembered that the morrow was a "garden day." Perhaps he regretted the fact, but he was not too young for loyalty. "You see——" he began; it was his way of introducing explanations.

"Can't come?" said the gentleman in a tone that might have meant amusement or disappointment, or, maybe, both. "Got an important engagement, I suppose."

Billy did not understand the words and he did not like the tone.

"You see——" he began again—and stopped helplessly.

He had promised the beautiful lady to keep the "garden days" a secret. He thought for a moment. "But I could come with you in the afternoon," he said kindly and eagerly.

The gentleman laughed, and somehow Billy laughed also, though he didn't know why.

"Well," said the former, "I don't usually go out in the afternoon, but we might manage to have an hour to-morrow, from three till four. Only you're not to tell—oh, well, never mind about that! Be ready at three."

"Yes, sir; yes—please what is your name?"

"My name, little chap, is Henry Denver."

Billy gravely nodded.

"Yes, Henry Denver; I'll be ready at three, 'cause I like you *awful*."

"My dear little chap!"

They passed the gates; the car stopped. Sir Henry got out and lifted Billy to the steps. Billy promptly kissed him, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do. Sir Henry turned away quickly and examined a back tyre.

"No," he said to the chauffeur presently, "it's all right." He got in and waved his hand. "Good-bye, Billy!"

"Good-bye—Henry Denver!" cried the boy cheerfully.

The lodge-keeper paused in closing one of the gates, and gaped at his nephew. But no words came, and he completed his business a dazed man.

"Let be!" said his wife, when he told his tale. "It near killed her when her own boy came, and it near killed them both when he went."

Such was the first of Billy's motor rides.

"Billy," said Sir Henry one day, "why can't you always come when I ask you?"

Billy wriggled uncomfortably.

"Rather not say?"

Billy nodded and squeezed the strong arm. He

would have liked to explain that he never mentioned his motor rides to the beautiful lady.

Sir Henry nodded also.

"I respect your reasons, whatever they may be, for secrecy, old man."

He knew the wife of his lodge-keeper to be a woman of fixed ideas; doubtless she had duties for the boy to perform on certain days. He was not going to interfere—just yet.

"You called it a 'portant engagement," said Billy.

"Did I? Well, Billy, it's for both of us to remember that gentlemen do not inquire into each other's 'portant engagements."

Which remark was Greek to Billy, though he liked the voice that made it.

"But I could come with you day after to-morrow, Henry Denver," he said graciously.

III

In the summer-house, Lady Denver looked at the watch on her wrist for the fifth time. Ten minutes to twelve. She gave a straightening touch to a snowy napkin covering a dish of fruit and another of sweet biscuits on the small round table, glanced at an open locker containing battledores and shuttlecocks, a bow with arrows and folding target, a little gun, a box of "alphabet bricks," and other toys, and stepped out into the sunshine. She walked slowly round the centre bed of the garden. The "white lilies" had gone, but other white flowers had been given their place. In a little while she halted and stood watching the iron gate. Presently she went down to the gate. She tried the handle to make sure that she had turned the key an hour earlier. Of course it opened. But even had it been locked Billy would not have gone away without

calling her, and she had been listening during her brief stay in the summer-house. No, Billy had not come, and—it looked as though he were not coming.

She leaned against the gate, her eyes on the path into the wood. It was the first time he had failed to come at the hour appointed; frequently he had been waiting at the gate for her—the gate which before his first coming she had thought never to open again. Even now it cost her a pang to open it, but a dear sense of solace followed the pang. For it was like opening her heart to gladness, though sadness held the chief chamber, and would do so always.

The wood and the path became blurred to her eyes. Why had the little boy not come? Perhaps he had grown tired of her; perhaps he had found a new friend, a boy friend, to play with. And yet he had clung to her at their parting yesterday. Even yet she felt the clutch of the small hands, the contact of the lithe young body. Oh, God, was even the second best and loveliest thing in her woman's world to be taken from her? Perhaps something had happened to Billy! At the thought her eyes became clear, her relaxed muscles stiffened. She must go at once to the lodge, and——

She turned quickly. The door in the opposite wall had opened and closed, and her husband was coming down the garden. She leaned back against the gate. Her husband had not entered her garden for nearly two years—not since that September day when he and she and Another had played together on the centre plot, then grass. For while women cling to sorrowful associations, men seek to avoid them.

She perceived that he looked uneasily from one side to the other. Had he discovered her secret, she wondered—the only secret she had had from him in their eight years of married life? And, if so, what would

he think of her? With all his gentleness and tenderness, might he not feel harshly about this thing she had done? As he caught sight of her she succeeded in forcing a smile to her lips, but for the life of her she could not leave the gate and go to meet him.

He smiled also, but not naturally. There was a look on his face that she had not observed for nearly two years, a look of anxiety tinged with excitement—almost the look that doctors know on the faces of men about to be fathers, or in danger of losing their fatherhood. Sadness and loving solicitude—these had been the expressions of her husband's face most familiar to her during that period; but this look— Suddenly she became calm. Whatever Harry had to say to her, it could be nothing that would hurt. Indeed, as he drew nearer, it seemed to her that he had come to ask a favour.

"Lydia," he said—he examined the end of a cigar which had gone out some time ago, and then raised his eyes to hers—"Lydia, you must wonder at seeing me here, but I—I had to come. There is—possibly you know—a little boy staying at the lodge at present. Martin is his uncle. This morning he was climbing a tree behind the lodge"—Lady Denver gave a gasp—"when he fell. His left arm was rather badly broken. I brought the doctor in the car. He is now with the boy—had put him right just before I left. Have I frightened you, Lydia?"

"No, no—just a little—go on, Harry."

"Well, the fact is, there isn't much accommodation, convenience, and so on at the lodge for such a case—and I wondered if we couldn't have him removed to——"

"Not the hospital, Harry—not the hospital."

"No, dear—to the house. Would you mind? Er—

could you stand it? He's a nice little chap—I've taken him in the car once or twice—perhaps oftener—and he's—er—all right. His parents are dead. His mother was a sister of Martin's, who might have been a great singer, and—er—his father, I've learned, was born a gentleman, though—but do you think we could manage it, Lydia?" He laid his hand on her arm. "It shall be just as you wish," he added.

There was a silence. Then she caught his hand. "Come with me for a minute," she said faintly, and led him to the summer-house.

"Look!" she whispered. "These belong to the little boy you speak of, Harry. All the summer he has been coming here nearly every morning. The first time I saw him he was lying at the gate, crying for his—mother. Oh, Harry, I couldn't help it! I wanted to tell you, but somehow I couldn't. I feared you might think I had forgotten our own little boy, our Freddie; or that I was not content in my life with you. Oh, I didn't know what you would think at all. And Billy just seemed to take possession. He didn't take another's place, Harry—you know that, don't you?—but just a little place of his own."

Denver's arm went round his wife. His eyes were wet.

"I know, I know," he said softly. "The little chap did the same to me—and I couldn't tell you, Lydia. He and I know each other so well that he calls me Henry Denver, and sometimes—er—he hugs me."

"Oh, my dear, I'm glad!" she murmured. "It doesn't make us love Freddie or each other the less, does it?"

Denver cleared his throat.

"I asked the doctor to wait," he said. "Will you come with me, Lydia?"

A little later they took the path through the wood.

Billy lay at the window of a lovely room overlooking the gardens, and the beautiful lady sat beside him.

"Doctor Stark says you may get up for a little while to-morrow," she was saying. "And next week we are all going to Barradale."

"Where is Barradale?"

"Away in the North. We always go there in the autumn, you know. At least, nearly always."

"Have you got a house there too?"

"Yes, Billy."

Billy lay quiet awhile, marvelling at the possession of two houses.

"Where is Henry Denver?" he asked suddenly. "He said he would come back soon."

"So he will, dearie. Ah, I see him coming now!"

Billy looked out of the window and waved his free hand.

"He's looking happy," he remarked.

"Are you sure, Billy?"

The beautiful lady's voice was eager. She rose and went to the window.

"It's all right," called her husband.

The lady bent over Billy and kissed him.

"My dear, dear little boy," she whispered.

"What, mother?"

Sir Henry entered quickly.

"I've fixed it," he said to his wife in an undertone; "but I was sorry for the Martins. I hadn't imagined the woman had much in the way of feelings. Poor soul, I left her scrubbing the kitchen table with her tears."

He turned to the boy.

"Old chap," he said briskly, yet anxiously, "how would you like to live with us always?"

"Yes, Billy dear," softly added the beautiful lady, "how would you like to live with us always?"

Her hand trembled.

Billy looked from one to the other, as if amazed at the question.

"Of *course* I'm goin' to live with you always!"

III

SOME ADVANTAGES OF BEING AN AUNT

WITH an agonised contortion of countenance the middle-aged woman hurried towards the small boy who, having escaped her vigilance a minute previously, was not standing on the edge of the pier, his hands in his trousers' pockets.

"John," she gasped, laying a hand on his shoulder, "come awa' frae there, or ye'll fa' in an' get droondit."

"I'll no' fa' in," he returned impatiently.

"Oh, but ye're ower near the edge, John. Ye might trip an' fa' in, an' then what wud ye dae?"

"Get saved," said John, endeavouring to shake off her hand.

"Aw, but ye best come back a bit, John, ye best come back a wee bit, an' be ready for the boat when it comes."

"The boat'll no' be in for ages," he returned, standing on one foot and swinging the other.

"John, John, for ony favour dinna dae that, or ye'll tumble in, as sure as——"

"If I tumble in, it'll be your fault. Ye're pushin' me!"

"I'm no'! I'm strivin' for to haud ye back. Oh, dear me! I'll never tak' ye to the sea again, never, though yer mither was to gang doon on her bended knees an' ask me to dae it. Can ye no' be nice an' quate like wee Agnes?" she inquired, with a brief

backward glance at a small girl with a fairly contented and very sticky countenance, nursing a shabby doll. "See hoo discreet yer wee sister is, John."

"She's discreet because she's fed up," remarked John unkindly. He gave a wriggle, and she emitted a low wail of dismay.

"John, came awa' wi' me this instant!"

"I'm fine here."

"John," she said solemnly, "what wud ye dae if ye fell in the ocean?"

"There's nae ocean here. There's nae ocean till ye pass Rothesay. Fayther tell't me."

"Aweel, it's jist as easy gettin' droondit at Kilmun as at Rothesay, John. But——"

"It's easier to get droondit at Rothesay. There's mair water."

"Never heed that the noo. What wud ye dae if ye fell aff the pier an' a big fish got the haud o' ye?" Aunt Sarah put the question, and paused for an answer, not without hope.

John transferred his weight from one foot to the other, and started swinging the former.

"What sort o' a fish, Aunt Sarah?" he coldly inquired.

"A big fish—a great big fish—a whale, maybe!" she replied in impressive tones.

A smile of pity dawned on John's face. "Did ye ever see a whale?" he asked.

"I ken it's a fearsome thing, onyway. I wudna like a whale to get the haud o' *me*."

"Did you ever see a whale here, at Kilmun?"

"No' exactly, John, no' exactly."

"An' ye never will!" said John. "There's nae big fish here, Aunt Sarah. Ye needna try to cod me. I'm no' sae easy coddit."

Aunt Sarah restrained her rising temper. "Weel,

ma lad," she said, with an attempt at sternness, "I'm no' wantin' to gang hame an' tell yer mither I left ye in a watery grave. So jist——"

"But if I was fa'in' in, ye wudna leave me in, wud ye?"

"Ay, wud I!" she replied, irritated by the impertinence.

"Wud ye? Then ye wud get the polis! Ay, ye wud be put in jail an' hanged! That's what ye wud get!"

Aunt Sarah swallowed several times. "If ever I tak' ye a trip again, may I be——"

"Supposin' there was really a whale," interrupted John, "an' supposin' it got the haud o' me, wud it no' let me oot efter three days, like Jonah?"

At last Aunt Sarah saw an opportunity to impress her young charge. Very solemnly she said:

"Na, John. It wud never let ye oot again."

"Eh?"

"Because, John, ye had been bad an' disobedient, an'——"

"So was Jonah."

"Ah, but—but, ye see, John—Jonah repentit," said Aunt Sarah rather feebly.

"He what?"

"He repentit—he was sorry."

"I could repent too," said John, without hesitation.

Though the weather was chilly, Aunt Sarah took out her handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from her brow.

A short silence was followed by a query from the boy. "What was Jonah daein' when he was in the whale? D'ye think he wud be standin' up, or sittin', or lyin' doon?"

"Haud yer tongue, John! That's no' a seemly question to be askin'. Come awa' noo, an' we'll see what

wee Agnes is daein'," said Aunt Sarah gently and persuasively.

"She's no' daein' onything."

"Weel, come wi' me. I'm no' gaun to let you stan' there."

"What wey?"

"Come, John! See hoo guid yer wee sister is, standin' where she was tell't to stan', an' never sayin' a word. Come, John."

"Agnes is gaun to be sea-sick on the boat," John remarked, turning and eyeing his sister with unwonted interest. "Ye shouldna ha'e let her eat twa rhubart terts, Aunt Sarah."

"We Agnes is fine," returned Aunt Sarah, who had given Agnes an extra tart for being "a good girl."

"She'll no' be vera fine when she's on the boat."

Aunt Sarah tried not to feel anxious. "It's no' stormy," she declared.

"It doesna need to be stormy for Agnes. She aye gets bad wi' pastry."

"John," cried the aunt reprovingly, "it's no' nice o'ye to speak like that aboot yer wee sister. A body wud think ye wud like to see her sea-sick."

"I like seein' folk sea-sick. I never get sick. But if Agnes doesna get bad on the boat, she'll be bad on the train. She canna help it. Ye shouldna ha'e gi'ed her twa rhubart terts, Aunt Sarah."

"Ye're an impiddent wee rascal!" exclaimed the poor woman. "Come awa'! See! Thonder the boat comin'."

"That's no' oor boat. Oor boat has a rid funnel," returned John, as, at last, he allowed himself to be dragged in his sister's direction.

Wee Agnes was certainly not looking too happy.

"Weel, Agnes," said her aunt brightly, "ye'll sune

be on the road hame noo. Ye're enjoyin' yersel', are ye no'?"

"Ay," faltered Agnes.

"Ye're tellin' a story!" remarked John.

"Haud yer tongue, John!" said his aunt indignantly, "I didna gi'e her mair to eat nor she wantit—did I, Agnes?"

Agnes nodded and shook her head.

"Ye're haudin' yer doll upside doon," John observed. "Ye'll gi'e it water on the heid, Agnes."

Agnes endeavoured to smile.

"Ha'e ye a pain?" he inquired.

"Uh-ha," she admitted.

John gave her a look of sympathy, then turned triumphantly to his aunt.

"I tell't ye!" he cried.

Aunt Sarah looked distressed. "Where's the pain, dearie?" she gently asked. "Is't in yer heid?"

Agnes hesitated a moment or two. "It's—it's ablow-ma pinny," she whispered bashfully.

"That's the pastry," said John, and turned away.

Aunt Sarah was too much disturbed about Agnes to follow him just then. She set herself to comfort the sufferer with kind and encouraging words and promises of certain rewards immediately on reaching Glasgow.

"Try to forget about it, dearie," she whispered. "Dinna brood on it when ye're on the boat an' the train."

"I'll try," said Agnes bravely.

"An' we'll gang doon to the saloon," said her aunt, "an' I'll tell ye stories, an'——"

Just then there was a loud splash followed by a cry. Aunt Sarah screeched and looked about her. There was no one visible on the end of the pier save Agnes and herself.

"Oh, where's John?" she cried, and rushed to the edge.

"Kee-hoy!" yelled a voice behind her, and there was John in the little signal-box at the corner.

Aunt Sarah turned on him, her mouth shaped to scream "Help!"

"Oh, John!" she gasped at last, in a tone of intense relief, "I thoct ye was awa'!"

John laughed uproariously.

"What was the splash?" she demanded, getting angry.

Her nephew pointed to a heap of bricks on the pier. "I thoct I wud gi'e ye a start." And he went into a fresh fit of delight.

Aunt Sarah threw her arms heavenward. "Never again," she cried, "never again will I tak' ither folks' weans to the coast."

An elderly and rather stout lady approached her as she was dragging John toward the middle of the pier.

"I'm afraid," she remarked pleasantly, "your little boy is rather obstreperous. Still, you know, we must make allowances——"

John stared stonily, and interrupted the remark with: "I'm no' her little boy."

So impudent was his expression that the elderly lady's geniality failed her, her conversation dried up, and she hurried away from the group.

"A whale wud be glad to get *her*," said John audibly.

Aunt Sarah's fingers itched to box his ears.

"I'll tell yer fayther about this!" she muttered wrathfully. "He'll sort ye!"

"What for?"

"What for? ye wee rascal! Fine ye ken what for! Oh, ye bad boy!—ye bad, *bad* boy!"

"Ye'll mak' Agnes greet," he said warningly. And, sure enough, the little girl's lip was quivering ominously.

"Agnes is affrontit at ye—she's ashamed o' her brither. Are ye no', Agnes?" said Aunt Sarah, patting the child's shoulder.

Agnes shook her head. "I'm no' likin' ye to scold him," she mumbled.

The distracted aunt heaved a sigh of despair and applied her handkerchief to her forehead.

"Never again!—never again!" she murmured.

The steamer came in at last. About a dozen passengers were by this time waiting to embark. Aunt Sarah insisted upon John's entering the gangway immediately in front of her. She did not wish to lose sight of him. Directly ahead of John was the lady who had once been genial. John took the opportunity to pin to her skirts a discarded label, imprinted with the words "Returned Empty," which he had picked from the quay.

"Come on, Agnes, an' I'll chase ye," he said when they reached the deck.

But Agnes was not equal to being chased.

"Ye've got to come doon to the saloon," said Aunt Sarah.

"Nae fears," said John. "I'm guan to the neb o' the boat to watch it scooshin' through the water."

"Ye are not."

"I am sot!"

"Boy," exclaimed a dignified, military-looking gentleman, "obey your mother!"

"She's no' ma mither!" retorted John as he dodged round the corner of the ticket office. "Sold again, tin whiskers!"

It is highly probable that the dignified, military-looking gentleman wished he hadn't spoken.

Aunt Sarah lost her head and gave chase to her nephew. Luckily for her, he slipped and fell on the iron plates surrounding the funnel. She seized him and dragged him struggling across the deck and down the stair leading to the fore saloon. Agnes followed, weeping bitterly and exclaiming, "Dinna hurt him! Oh, please, dinna hurt him!"

The voyage lasted little over half an hour, but during that period John managed to escape at least ten times, to the utter exhaustion of his aunt, who fled wildly after him, breathing threats and prayers on every occasion.

"Never again!—never again!" repeated Aunt Sarah to herself, when, after further anxieties and terrors, she found herself and her charges on board the train. "Never again will I tak' onything to dae wi' anither woman's brats, even supposin' they are ma sister's," she reflected. "'Deed, I think Bessie should be black ashamed o' herself to ha'e brocht a wean up like that John. I'm done wi' him, onywey."

They had the compartment to themselves, and for a space John kept things lively, but at last, somewhat to his aunt's surprise, he obliged her by taking a seat between her and the window.

The train rumbled on. Agnes snuggled into the shelter of her aunt's right arm, hugging her doll and humming a little drowsy tune to herself.

"Ye're feelin' better, dearie?" asked her aunt.

"Uh-ha," Agnes replied contentedly.

Aunt Sarah closed her eyes. She was more than tired.

"Never again!—never again!" she sighed.

After a little while she glanced at the boy, who was so quiet that she suspected some fresh mischief. But John's head was laid back against the coarse upholstery and his eyes were shut, the lids very white on the cheeks that the keen spring air had reddened.

"It's a mercy he's quate at last!" she said to herself. "The wee brat!"

Presently John slipped toward her till his head lay against her arm.

"The wee brat!" thought Aunt Sarah. "An' to look at him noo a body wud think he was a—a angel. He doesna look extra comfortable," she reflected a little later. "His neck's twisted-like."

So she moved her arm very cautiously and made him as comfortable as she could.

As the train entered Glasgow, John, still rubbing his eyes, nudged his aunt.

"Here!" he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Eh?" She inclined her ear toward him. It suddenly occurred to her that he was going to say he was sorry. "What dae ye want to tell me, John?" she asked encouragingly and gently.

"I've decidit no' to tell on ye for gi'ein' Agnes the twa rhubart terts."

IV

THE GOOD FAIRY

THE door of the junior schoolroom was almost closed, and for a few moments the small boy with the red head and the brown suit a good size too big for him listened at the aperture. Then with the utmost caution he pushed it open and peeped in. Nobody there! His expression of anxiety gave place to that of relief. He was in time after all!

With stealthy strides he tip-toed across the floor to the teacher's desk. His left hand raised the lid and held it up while his right transferred something seemingly fragile from his jacket pocket to the interior. For a brief space he gazed at it, half satisfied, half reluctant, then gently closed the lid and strolled over to the hearth, where he proceeded to chafe his hands in a manner that suggested nervousness, if not guilt. His classmates began to drop in. He received his particular friends genially enough, yet latterly with something like condescension.

Ten minutes later school began, and not long afterwards Miss Hamilton, the teacher, had occasion to apply to her desk. The red-haired boy, whose name was John, watched her with a sort of fascination. His lips were parted; he breathed quickly. His fingers gripped the seat of the form, one of his rather thin legs was tensely twisted round the other. He was going through an experience not new, yet one which had become more exciting with each repetition. Would Miss Hamilton speak this time? Would she disclose

the thing of which he alone could tell the secret? He feared she would . . . he feared she wouldn't. . . .

Above the desk-lid Miss Hamilton smiled to herself, and he wriggled; he almost squealed. Then, still smiling, she let down the lid. It was all over! She wasn't going to say anything. Was he relieved or disappointed? Possibly both. The strain relaxed only to spring taut again. For stay! She was lifting the lid again! . . . Oh, my, she was taking out something! It was—it *was* his secret!

Miss Hamilton was quite young as well as pretty, and she let out a little giggle as she held up, in full view of the classes, an egg—a fine, big, delicately browned hen's egg! Several little boys laughed aloud.

"Really," said Miss Hamilton, "I *must* know who the good fairy is!"

As for John, he glowed with self-consciousness and shuddered with ecstasy. A Good Fairy! Assuredly he was not used to being called names like that.

Miss Hamilton continued: "This is the sixth morning within a fortnight that I have found a splendid new-laid egg in my desk; and we all know how scarce and dear eggs are at this season. Well, I am not going to ask the good fairy to stand up just now, but I hope that she—or he"—obviously an afterthought—"will speak to me at the close of school to-day, for, as you know, it is horrid not to be able to say 'thank you,' especially when one wants to say it as much as I do. And, as you also know, we break up to-morrow for our Christmas holidays. . . . And now we must get on with our lessons."

John's state of bliss lasted until the afternoon, when he fell to wondering what Miss Hamilton would say to him at the end of school. He hoped she would not ask a certain question. After all, he thought it would be better to see her, if possible, without the others

knowing. He decided that he would hide somewhere and waylay Miss Hamilton after she had left the school.

Alas for his hopes and plans! In the last hour Miss Hamilton received a telegram telling her that some one was coming to see her, and the instant her duties were finished she hurried away to the station, with sparkling eyes and unwontedly warm complexion, but without the slightest remembrance of the Good Fairy.

John was grievously cast down until, on his way home, a happy thought came to him. On the morrow he would just put another egg in her desk, and that would surely remind her, and everything would be all right!

Yet there's many a slip—even for good fairies.

John lived with an aunt and uncle in a cottage about a mile outside the village. For nearly a year that had been his home. If he regretted the loss of his parents, he never showed it. Certainly they had not been particularly estimable people, and John was a curiously self-contained youngster. On the other hand, his aunt and uncle were undeniably worthy people. If they had not welcomed the orphan with cordiality, they had, at least, striven to do what they deemed their duty towards him. But they were a deplorably solemn pair for a little boy to live with—especially Aunt Brown. Uncle Brown occasionally gave feeble evidence that his suppression was not utterly complete. He was an essentially mild man, whereas his wife was uncompromisingly stern in all her ways.

It was morning in the cottage. The frost had gone, the snow had come in force. Outside it was scarcely

yet light. A lamp illuminated the kitchen, a model of austere orderliness.

Mrs. Brown looked hard at her nephew, who was making to rise from the breakfast-table.

"Feenish yer parritch," she commanded.

"I canna."

"Sit still an' feenish it!" She glanced up at the clock. "Ye're far ower early for the schule."

"I'm no' hungry," said John, with a glance of appeal in the direction of his uncle, who was stolidly absorbing an enormous mass of nutriment.

"Snap it up! Wasters come to want." Mrs. Brown had a great store of proverbs, all of a more or less cheerless nature.

"It'll keep oot the cauld, John," said his uncle, scarcely pausing.

Excitement, apprehension, and other emotions had ruined the boy's appetite for this morning, yet his aunt's will was law. He forced himself to "make a clean plate"—then rose.

"I've tell't ye, ye dinna need to leave sae early," his aunt said sharply.

"Ay, I need," he returned, the least thing rebelliously.

Mr. Brown interposed unexpectedly. "Let him gang. He'll ha'e some ploy on. It's the day afore the holidays."

For once the woman did not argue. With an impatient and indistinct remark about the folly of holidays, she went over to the hearth, and John, with a grateful glance at his uncle, who was once more too busy to notice it, hustled into his coat, seized his bag, and went out.

In the snowy half light he made his way round to the hen-house. Mrs. Brown kept only a few fowls, but they were prize ones and her greatest pride. Every

egg was a personal triumph as well as an item of profit. Lately she had sold a dozen to the Manse at the great price of three shillings!

John unlatched the door and—hesitated. He hated that gloomy, cobwebby interior, and being town-bred, he was not a little afraid of the creatures he could scarcely see. But he had braved it all before for Miss Hamilton's sake, and now it would be for his own sake as well, for he did greatly desire that she should know, ere she went away for the holidays, who the Good Fairy really was. So presently he was inside, and beginning, very gingerly, to feel in the nests.

In the murkiest corner he touched feathers, and a big yellow hen, with a fearsome cackle, flew over his shoulder and out of doors, to continue her protests in the snow. And in the same moment a puff of wind blew the door shut with a bang.

John shut his mouth on a screech, but it was a long half-minute before his hand went into the cosy nest. This time, however, he had his reward. A regular whopper of an egg—the most splendid yet!

Just then the door was opened and his aunt appeared. With a black shawl over her head, her gaunt face in the grey light looked very dreadful.

"What's this?" she cried, in a terrible voice. Then "Drap that egg!" Doubtless she meant to say, "Return that egg to the nest!"

Whether the boy took her literally or the egg slipped from his hand need not be discussed. With a sickening little crash it exploded on the floor. Then without a sound the boy bolted past her and away to school.

All was lost! Yet fate had not exhausted her blows. On entering the schoolroom he found it humming with early-birds, some merry, others cross, while Miss Hamilton's desk was covered with offerings mainly of a baked and vegetable nature. Clearly the Good Fairy

idea had "caught on," and the teacher on her arrival wished, however graciously she expressed herself, that she had held her tongue on the previous morning.

For John the day was one of misery and despair, and more than once he was near to breaking down. Immediately on the close of school he made for home with all its terrors rather than wait with the crowd to bid good-bye to the beloved teacher, who was leaving by the early train next morning. For the greatest blow of all had fallen. Even Miss Hamilton had been wrong. He was not a Good Fairy, or anything like it. Conscience had at last told him so!

It was evening in the cottage. The meal was over. Everything was tidied up. On the right of the hearth sat Mr. Brown, his uneasy countenance concealed by a weekly paper; on the left Mrs. Brown, cold and stern, knitting steadily. On a stool, set apart from his relatives, squatted John. *The Pilgrim's Progress* was on his knees, and his eyes were glued to it, but he had not turned a page for half an hour.

There had been a long silence, broken only by the wail of the wind in the chimney, when Mrs. Brown spoke.

"Peter, the time has come."

Her husband started. Behind the paper he muttered: "I canna dae it."

"It's yer duty."

"Weel, I'll see aboot it in the mornin'."

"It's got to be done the nicht, an' the suner the better."

"Oh, woman," said Peter, in a lowered voice, "let it pass this time."

"Spare the rod an' spile the child!" she retorted.

"Fudge!" Peter let fall the paper, possibly in astonishment at his own temerity.

"What?" exclaimed Mrs. Brown, as one who refuses to believe her ears.

"There was plenty o' the rod afore he cam' to us," said Peter, "an' what guid has it done?"

"Man, wud yee set yersel' up against Solomon?"

"Solomon had his gifts," said Peter wearily, "but I never was entirely satisfied wi' the wisdom o' a man that had several gross o' wives an' dear knows how mony conc——"

"Whisht!"

John looked up. He had been in disgrace for a long, long time, and was feeling horribly lonely. Perhaps at last they were going to forgive his crime, and here was an opportunity of attracting his uncle's attention.

"Uncle," he said gently, "what's a conk?"

"Haud yer tongue!" snapped his aunt, with an angry look at her man.

Mr. Brown made an odd sound in his throat. Then gravely he answered: "Merely a sort o' lady, John."

"Peter," said his wife, "if ye dinna dae yer duty, ye'll be sorry."

Peter knew he would be sorry either way, but habit reasserted itself and obedience followed. He cleared his throat.

"John," he said ponderously, "I was vexed to hear ye had been—a—tamperin' wi' yer aunt's eggs. What for did ye dae it?"

John, looking wretched, answered nothing.

"Tamperin'!" exclaimed Mrs. Brown. "*Stole* is the word for't! An' eggs that few an' valuable!"

"Maybe he didna ken he was stealin'," said Peter. "Did ye, John?"

"I—I thocht the hens wud lay plenty mair, Uncle Peter."

"Ye had nae business to think what the hens wud dae," his aunt said bitterly. "Peter, he's confessed to

stealin' hauf a dizzen in the last twa weeks, but he wudna confess what he did wi' them. Ask him!"

"John, what did ye dae wi' the eggs?"

No answer; for John had made up his mind that, whatever happened, he would not get his teacher into trouble.

"There ye see!" cried Mrs. Brown, at last. "If he had confessed, I micht ha'e overlooked it. Dae yer duty, Peter, as ye promised me ye wud. It's for his ain guid," she paused. "I'll gang oot to the henhouse till ye get it ower." She nodded in the direction of a cane, commonly used on carpets, that stood against the wall beside his chair, where she had placed it earlier. Then taking up her shawl and a candle, she left the kitchen.

"The Lord help me!" sighed Peter, and added under his breath: "I wish I had Solomon here!" Without looking at the boy he said: "John, will ye tell me what ye did wi' the eggs?"

"I canna."

"Weel, I'm dam—I mean, I'm exceedin'ly sorry, but I'll ha'e to punish ye—gi'e ye a lickin', in fac'. Prepare yersel'!"

"Hoo am I to prepare masel'?" quavered John.

With a sudden inspiration the man pointed with the cane to the red cloth on the table. "Tak' it an' wrap it roun' yer—a legs."

A new form of torture, perhaps, but John obeyed.

Mr. Brown advanced and took his victim carefully by the coat collar. "Noo mind," he said, "I've got to try for to hurt ye. Ma duty, ye ken," he added, rather apologetically. "Are ye ready?" He flourished the cane and brought it down gingerly on the tablecloth. "Did that hurt ye?"

"Ay—na, it didna, Uncle Peter."

"Honest lad!" A slightly harder stroke. "Did that?"

"Na."

After several cuts the tormentor paused, looking helpless.

"Uncle Peter," said John, "ye'd best lick me proper, or she'll no' be pleased wi' ye."

"Tits! Ye'll break ma heart! There!" (*whack*).
"Was that no sair?"

"A wee bittie."

(*Whack.*) "An' that?"

John winced.

"It wud be better if ye cried oot," said Mr. Brown, and struck once more. "Yell!"

John gave a squeak. Then suddenly, "Oh, Uncle Peter, ye're awfu' kind," he said, and fell to sobbing bitterly.

With a bad word Peter flung the cane across the kitchen. "God forgi'e us a'," he muttered, and unwrapping the cloth, replaced it on the table.

"John," he said, and patted his nephew's shoulder, "dinna greet. This'll be a secret atween us. An' I'll tak' yer word if ye promise never to gang near the hens again, excep' by yer aunt's orders. I suppose ye sooked the eggs—a natural proceedin' for a hungry juvenile in cauld weather. An' ye'll tell yer aunt yer sorry, an' try to mak' it up to her—eh?"

Unable to speak, the boy nodded emphatically.

"Guid lad! Tell her the morn, an' gang to yer bed noo. Oh, wait a meenute! Here's anither secret. Tell naebody."

John felt something put into his hand and himself guided from the kitchen. In the passage Peter took up a small safety lamp and carried it into the box of a room where the boy slept.

"Guid nicht, John, an' forget yer troubles," he said, and closed the door.

After a while John opened his hand expecting to

find a ha'penny—and lo and behold—a shilling! It was long—for a little boy, at any rate—before he slept, but when slumber arrived it found him perfectly happy, for everything had come right and he was, without the faintest shadow of doubt, a Good Fairy after all.

When Mrs. Brown returned to the kitchen, her husband, from behind the trembling weekly paper, managed to say:

“His sufferin’s was terrible, Elizabeth. I hope ye didna hear him.”

She sat down as though very tired and moistened her lips.

“I had ma fingers in ma ears,” she said.

It was morning in the cottage.

“Is John no’ up yet?” inquired the uncle, gazing at the steaming dish in front of him.

“I thocht I wud let him rest, seein’ he’s got his holidays,” returned the aunt.

He stared at her, and possibly she did not like it, for she moved from the kitchen, remarking, “I’ll see if he’s wauken noo.”

A moment later Peter heard her cry out.

In the small room he found her standing at the window, which was open, in one hand a scrap of exercise paper, in the other a shilling. The paper bore the following words pencilled in a childish hand:

“This shilling has bot the eggs I stole. With thanks from John.”

The man and woman suddenly looked ten years older. With one accord they whispered—

“Whaur can he be?”

The porter was slamming the doors, when a small

boy with a red head rushed from the snow into the station and along the platform, his countenance expressing acute anxiety.

Fortunattely Miss Hamilton was looking out of the open window.

"What is it, John?" she cried.

Though he could not speak just then, his desire to do so was plain.

At the risk of being left behind, the girl descended.

"What's the matter? Tell me, John." She bent over him and put her arm round his shoulders. "Come, dearie"—giving him a squeeze.

At last he got it out in a hoarse whisper.

"Please, I'm the Guid Fairy . . . but—but I'll no' be able to fetch ye ony mair eggs."

V

THE ANSWER

"MOTHER!"

A pause of ten seconds.

"Mother!"

A pause of five seconds.

"*Mother!*"

"What is it, Teddy?" There was at least a trace of asperity in Mrs. Bulward's voice as she turned, pencil in hand, from the fire to face her small son in the big bed.

"Why do you always make faces when you are writing in that book, mother?" Teddy was recovering from one of "those nasty feverish colds," and one of his privileges during the convalescent period was to spend the afternoons in the big bed, looking for all sorts of extra considerations as if he deserved them.

"I don't make faces!" Mrs. Bulward returned with a haughtiness rather absurd in the circumstances. But she was not quite herself after several disturbed nights and this long, futile struggle with the housekeeping accounts book. Moreover, she was young, and had not yet forgotten she was pretty.

"Perhaps you don't know you are making them," said Teddy mildly, "but you are. I don't think I like it."

"Oh, be quiet and keep your arms under the clothes."

"Can't breathe with my arms under the clothes."

"Nonsense! Put them under at once!"

"All right"—in tones of patient resignation; "I sup-

pose you'd prefer your little boy to be suffocated. May I have a drink first?"

"You may," she replied stiffly, getting up.

"I never feel so fond of you when you speak in that other lady's voice," he remarked, and took a sip. "I don't think the milk's so good to-day," he added, lying down again. "It's got a fish-fat taste."

"Don't be absurd! You imagine things because you are not quite well yet. Fish-fat indeed! I never heard of such a thing."

"I have. You ought to speak to Mr. Boo and Mrs. Moo about it." These being the worthy couple, better known as Mr. and Mrs. McPherson, who supplied milk in the neighborhood. "Sometimes," he added, "the butter has a bow-wow taste."

"That will do, Teddy. You must take a nap now."

"I'm not sleepy. What are *you* going to do?"

"Never mind," she replied, the accusation of "making faces" still rankling. To herself she said, "But I *will* find out where that one and threepence has gone to, before Dick comes home." It should be mentioned here that prior to the war Mrs. Bulward had never seen the inside of a housekeeping accounts book.

Teddy lay still for quite a long time, and she had just discovered an error of fourpence, which left her with the more than ever puzzling discrepancy of eleven-pence to deal with when—

"Mother!"

She snatched the misery-making volume from her knee and slammed it upon the floor.

Teddy sat up all interest. "Was it a mouse?"

Controlling herself partially she said: "You know perfectly well there are no mouse in this hice!"

He laughed heartily. "Say it again, mother!"

She laughed, too, in spite of herself. "It's a silly old book," she said. "But you must lie down, or you won't

be better in time for Christmas." Having tucked him in, she went back to the fire and took up some sewing.

"Mother!"

"Yes, dear?" Evidently the recent little outburst had done her good.

"Mother, has the turkey come?"

"What turkey?"

"Our turkey."

She threaded a needle before she said kindly: "I'm afraid, Teddy, we are not going to manage a turkey this Christmas."

"Why?" He all but sat up in his astonishment.

"Because of the war, dearie."

"Have the Germans been shooting the turkeys, too?"

"I couldn't say; but I'm afraid we can't afford a turkey."

"Why can't we afford a turkey?"

"Our pennies are required for so many other things."

"I'll ask daddy."

"Well, I don't think I'd do that, if I were you. You see, daddy would give us a turkey if he possibly could."

"I see." Teddy gave a little sigh. "Are turkeys awful dear?"

"They are very expensive, Teddy. Even little ones cost——"

"Couldn't we have a *fearfully* small, little one—about this size? Look, mother!" His hands came above the clothes to indicate a bulk the size of an orange.

She smiled and shook her head. "They don't keep them quite so small as that, dear. Why, the fowl we are going to have will be far bigger——"

"I hate fowl! I simply can't stick it!"

"Oh, Teddy! You know you love fowl!"

"Not when I'm thinking of turkey."

"Well, I'm sure you will love *our* fowl when you see it. It will be stuffed just like a turkey, you know. A great many people this year," she went on, "will be missing turkey——"

"I'll miss it dreadfully!"

"I meant doing without it. It isn't so difficult to do without things when we think of our brave soldiers—is it, Teddy?"

"If I had a turkey I would give the brave soldiers a great big bit of it."

"I'm sure you would. But by doing without it we can help them in other ways. You see?"

"I—I think I'll have a nap now," he said, and turned on his side. He was well under the clothes now, and he kept his eyes shut for about a minute. He was just old enough to feel that, somehow, Christmas was not right without a turkey. It is not the aged, but the very young who truly venerate tradition. It was not the disappointment of a greedy nature that brought the moisture to the young eyes; simply a sadness not to be explained and described in so many words. Things generally in his little world had gone wrong. At the end of five minutes:

"Mother!"

"Yes, dear?"

"Have you asked God for a turkey?"

Mrs. Bulward was taken aback, but managed to reply:

"I think we should ask Him only for very important things just now, Teddy."

"But a turkey's a very 'portant thing. Do you think He'd mind if I asked Him to-night? He wouldn't be cross, would He—even if He was awful busy looking after the soldiers?"

"No, I'm sure He would never be angry with a little

boy who believed in Him. But, you know, Teddy dear, He does not give everything we ask for——”

“I know! I’ve never got that box of tools yet, and I’ve asked for it nights and nights. But I daresay He was afraid I’d hurt myself with the saw, though I promised Him I’d be awful careful. . . . But don’t you think I might ask for the turkey?”

His mother came over and stroked his hair. “Ask for everything you want, Teddy boy. Just always remember that He knows best what is good for us.”

Teddy reflected for a moment. Then—“I’d better do it now, for I guess heaps of people will be asking for turkeys. Please kneel down. . . .”

A little later he said:

“You’re not to tell daddy, ’cause I want him to get a surprise.”

Just then Mr. Bulward arrived home, unexpectedly early, and all doubts and melancholy departed, so far as Teddy was concerned. Mr. Bulward, too, was looking brighter than of late. He had been hard hit by the war, but perhaps the sorest blow had been his rejection for military service.

He was doing what he could in other ways, and as a special constable in the small hours of the morning had acquired merit if not distinction.

He brought news that pleased his wife and boy almost as much as himself. His younger brother, who had been lying wounded in Malta, was on his way home, and would arrive in time to spend Christmas with them.

“He should be here on the 23rd, or early on the 24th, Milly,” said Mr. Bulward. “You’ll get plenty of stories from your Uncle Jack, Teddy.”

“I’m going to give him a present,” Teddy announced, with that lightning quickness of decision which only children possess.

"What'll you give him?" asked his father.

"I don't know yet. Wait till I see what's in my stocking."

"Oh, but you wouldn't give away a Christmas present, Teddy!" cried his mother admonishingly.

"You always give away the things you get from Aunt Bella."

"I think we might give him a box of decent cigarettes," interposed Mr. Bulward, chiefly to cover his wife's confusion.

"But can we afford it?" said Teddy. "Of course! I forgot he was a soldier!"

II

Captain Bulward arrived on the 23rd, but so late at night that Teddy did not see him till breakfast-time. Teddy was pretty much himself again, and as the morning was fine, there was nothing to qualify his satisfaction when his uncle suggested a stroll round. His father was bound to business as usual, his mother, in those days of economy, had her hands full with household affairs, and it must be confessed that his pride and delight were not lessened when he realised that he was to have the Captain all to himself for a couple of hours.

"Well, where are we going, old cock?" the soldier cheerfully inquired, as he took his stick, which unfortunately he required, from the stand.

Teddy had been called many odd things in his time, but never "old cock." It was a lovely name!

"I think Uncle Jack would like to see the Park," said his mother, who always meant well, while she examined him from head to heel.

Teddy's face fell. The Park would be "awfully stale," but he did not say so.

"And I," said the captain gravely, "think Uncle Jack would, on the whole, prefer an hour at the shops, and then a rest in a nice tea-room, and then an hour in a picture house, if one should be open so early, and then a drive home in a taxi. How's that, Teddy?"

Teddy, his countenance beaming, clutched his uncle's hand. "Come on!" he cried, shoving his free hand in his pocket.

"But no rich cakes, mind!" Mrs. Bulward called after them. A moment later she rushed out in their track. "Teddy, have you got your clean hanky?"

"Of course!"

Having made him exhibit it, she retired more leisurely, stopped at the gate to wave till they passed round the corner, then turned towards the house, satisfied that she had done all that a mother could do—and on the doorstep beheld one of his gloves.

As they neared the shops:

"I guess you're going to have a pretty merry Christmas, Teddy," the Captain remarked.

"I guess so," said Teddy, wishing he would call him "old cock" again.

"The war won't make any difference to Santa Claus, I suppose. He'll come along all right, up to time, as usual, won't he?"

"I hope so. The enemy couldn't keep him away, could they, Uncle Jack?"

"I'm sure not! Do you ever happen to hear beforehand what you're going to get in your stocking?"

"Oh, yes; some things I know all about before they come."

"Really! Things you particularly want, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Well, look here, old cock"—Teddy gave a small

squirm of delight—"I wish you'd tell me what you expect to get this year. I'm awfully interested, and I promise you I'll keep it a secret."

"Well, you see," said Teddy, with sudden gravity, "it's sort of different this year. I know of two things only, and they're just little things, and I—I didn't—don't really want them awful much. Of course, I'll be glad to get them, but——"

"I see. I wonder if you would mind telling me of something you did want—do—want—awfully much. You see, it's a long time since I was a little boy, but I do remember some of the things I wanted awfully much—and never got—and it would be interesting to see if you and I have ever wanted the same sort of things."

The idea appealed to Teddy. After a moment's thought he said very confidentially, "Did you ever want awful much a train, Uncle Jack, a train with rails and——?"

The Captain put down his stick with a thump. "Now, isn't that extraordinary?" he exclaimed. "A train with rails is *the* thing I wanted more than anything in the world."

"Oh! I wonder if it was a train like the one I wanted? I'll show you it, if you like. It's in a shop along here. *Would* you like to see it?"

"Rather!"

"It's rather dear, you know. Daddy said he was afraid it would completely bust Santa Claus to give it to me. Do you think it would?"

"Well, you must remember, old cock, that the war has made differences, and even Santa Claus may be feeling the pinch—you know what I mean? It's not because he doesn't want to give the most splendid presents. I say!" cried the Captain, deeming it wise to change the subject, for the time being, at any rate, "look

at that turkey in the window there! Isn't he a whopper?"

He was sorry he had spoken, for a most dismal expression dawned on the boy's face.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Teddy. "I had sort of forgotten. And He hasn't sent one!" He came to a sudden halt. "I suppose He was too busy looking after the soldiers, or perhaps He didn't think it would be good for us—specially the stuffing."

The soldier bent down. "What's the matter, old cock?"

"It's a secret, but I'll tell *you*. Whisper! Mother said we couldn't afford a turkey this year, so I just prayed for one."

"Oh!" murmured the Captain, a trifle awkwardly.

"I prayed pretty hard too, I can tell you, but I did forget the night before last. Still, I 'membered last night. But it hasn't come. I suppose it won't come now, and we'll just be having fowl to-morrow—and fowl's very good too, Uncle Jack, only you mustn't think of turkey when you're eating it."

"Are you so very fond of turkey, Teddy?"

"It—it's not just the turkey, either. It's—it's——"

"The association, perhaps?"

"Yes, the 'sociation—not the tummy, you know."

"I know. So you're afraid it won't come now?"

Teddy nodded. "'Cause you see, I said: 'Please send quickly, so that mother won't need to buy the fowl.' . . . Let's go and look at the shops, Uncle Jack. Perhaps the train will be away now."

"I hope not," said Uncle Jack. "I want to see that train."

Well, the train was still there, and it was really a very fine train, and the price on the ticket was "Only 18s. 6d."

The Captain produced a Treasury note.

"Look here, old cock! You know what this is. Twenty shillings—eighteen-and-six and a little bit more. Now which would you rather buy—the train or the turkey?"

"Oh, the train!" gasped Teddy, without an instant's hesitation.

"Good lad! come in and buy it!"

When the shopman began to tie up the splendid purchase, the Captain said:

"I want to get some tobacco, so you'll wait here till I come back, Teddy."

There were heaps of wonderful things to see in the shop, but Teddy only hugged his parcel and looked thoughtful till his uncle returned.

"Now then," said the latter, "I think we'll go and have a cup of tea and a poor cake."

Teddy gave a small laugh and relapsed into seriousness.

"Anything wrong with the train?" inquired the Captain when they had walked a little way.

"Oh, no! I was just thinking."

"What were you thinking?"

"'Bout the turkey. Uncle Jack, I shouldn't be *awful* surprised if the turkey came too."

"Wouldn't you?"

"No; 'cause it wouldn't be any wonderfuller than the train."

The captain lit a cigarette. "By the way, old cock, did you—er—pray for the train?"

"No," answered Teddy decidedly.

The Captain seemed a little disappointed, till Teddy shoved a small hand into his big one, saying: "I forgot to say 'thank you,' and please, I can't carry this parcel any further."

Then they proceeded to the promised entertainments.

On their return home Mrs. Bulward simply rushed at them.

"Oh, Teddy, what do you think? A great magnificent turkey has arrived!"

"Has it?" said Teddy, without much excitement. "Uncle Jack bought me a splendid train!"

Presently she turned to her brother-in-law. "I believe it was you who sent——"

"Don't!" he said gravely.

VI

JOCK

"Now, my lad, don't be trying that game again," said the third mate of the s.s. *Neptune*, as he led the boy by the ear across the gang-plank to the quay. "If I hadn't caught ye just now, that hatch would ha' been closed, and that would ha' been an end to ye. Away home wi' ye, and don't try it again." He lifted his foot, and with a push rather than a kick propelled the boy a couple of yards in the direction mentioned.

Recovering his balance, the boy, whose burning cheeks were not so hot as his heart, went slowly from the quayside and at last disappeared from the mate's view round the corner of a shed. There he rubbed his sleeve across his eyes, sniffed once or twice, and, later, passed into the street called Broomielaw. For the third time he had failed; for the second time he had been ignominiously ejected from a ship, while less than a week ago he had suffered a somewhat similar experience after attempting to leave Glasgow by rail. On the last occasion, as on the others, all had gone well to begin with. Eluding observation, he had secreted himself under the seat of a first-class compartment of a train standing in Queen Street Station, and after a long, anxious wait the train had started. At the end of five minutes it had stopped and gone backwards, and stopped again. At the end of an hour the boy had realised that he was the sole passenger on the train, and that, in fact, the train was not going anywhere;

it had merely taken him to the outskirts of the city, some three miles from home. Threats of jail and a cuff or two had been his portion ere he was free from the vast railway yard. And he had gone home, humbled by hunger.

He was hungry now, but he tried not to hasten, until he remembered that he was very late for the mid-day meal. The cook-shops in the Broomielaw made his mouth water. Even the dignity of an elderly person wavers at the pinch of hunger, and this boy was barely eleven years old. "There is nothing," we smugly declared, "like a good, healthy appetite." Nothing, indeed! It is stronger than conscience.

The boy turned into a quiet, dingy street, and ere long crossed roaring, rattling, clanging Argyle Street, then up another quiet, dingy street, and so to the house called home. It was summer and the day close, but he felt chilly as he climbed the flights of grey stone stairs. On the third landing he halted, and after some hesitation knocked on one of the four doors there.

He waited, then knocked again . . . and yet again.

At last the door was opened.

"Wipe yer feet," said a cold voice, belonging to a lean, wiry, hard-featured woman of middle age.

She was the boy's aunt. His mother, her sister, had been dead for six years. His father, a mate on a great sailing ship, had been away for nearly twelve months.

"Jock! Where ha'e ye been?" the woman demanded severely, closing the door and following the boy into the kitchen.

"Oot," said Jock briefly, his eyes roving round the room.

There was no sign of a meal. The table, scrubbed white, as was all the unpainted woodwork of the room, had been replaced against the wall. Only a kettle

stood on the satin-black hob of the open range. Miss Wishart was both cleanly and godly.

"I'm askin' ye where ye've been?"

"Doon at the docks," he answered sullenly. Within the moment, however, his eyes lit up. So he had not been forgotten after all!

He moved towards the sink in the window.

"Doon at the docks!" the woman repeated. "I've warned ye no' to gang there. Ye'll learn naething there but bad language."

Jock seemed not to hear her. On the sink-board he had spied a plate containing four potatoes which had been boiled in their skins. The skins had burst, disclosing the tempting mealiness. The potatoes were now cold—but what of that?

The boy picked up one of them.

"Drap it!" cried his aunt.

He hesitated. "I'm hungry, auntie," he said.

"Drap it, I tell ye! I've warned ye a hunner times no' to be late; I've warned ye no' to gang to the docks. . . . I said ye wud get nae dinner if ye was late—an' I'm gaun to keep ma word. . . . Drap that tattie this meenute!"

Still he hesitated.

She had been standing by the hearth, but now she took a step towards him.

"Jock! Dae what I tell ye!"

"But I—I'm hungry."

"Serves ye richt! That's yer punishment. Drap that tattie an' gang ben the hoose. I'm gaun to lock ye up for the efternune. Oh, but I wish it was time for the schule to tak' up again. Satan's ower free in the holidays. . . . Drap it, I tell ye!"

Jock flared up. Back swung his arm, and he threw the potato straight at his aunt. Against her somewhat large brow it exploded in fragments.

The next instant he was in her sinewy grasp. From the dresser she snatched a porridge spurtle, but her passion died ere she could strike. Dropping the weapon, she pushed the boy before her to the other room, a sort of parlour with a bed in the wall, where he slept. She locked him in, and returned to the kitchen. There she picked up the spurtle and laid it in its place, swept up the shattered potato and set the fragments on the window-sill for the sparrows, and washed her face and hands. Then by the white-scrubbed arm-chair she went down on her knees. . . . Five minutes later she was knitting industriously.

For a time Jock sat nursing his misery and resentment, but at last he rose, and, after a prolonged stare at the street below, the chimneys opposite, began to move about the room, slowly circling the little round table, on which were set a Family Bible, a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, an ancient volume of sermons, several recent numbers of *The Missionary Mail*, and a glass case containing a collection of waxen fruits with exceeding garish complexions. Jock had always admired the collection, possibly because it was the sole distinct suggestion of gaiety in the house, but now something whispered to him, "Smash it!" He knew how his aunt treasured it. He knew also that his aunt would punish him for its destruction. But then his aunt found fault with nearly everything he did. . . . He was so hungry. . . . He lifted up the bulky *Pilgrim's Progress*. He rather liked the pictures in it; some bits of the reading also were to his taste. He poised it above the glass case. He had only to let it slip, and his revenge would be complete. Quite likely his aunt would cry. He felt that she would, though he had never seen her do so in the past.

He lifted the book a few inches higher, and just

then the clock in the kitchen struck four slow and solemn strokes.

"Four bells!" he said to himself, and all but let the book slip from his fingers. He grew hot and cold as he laid it carefully on the table. He went back to the window.

From one of his pockets he produced a yard or so of coarse twine, and proceeded to tie it, as tightly as possible, about his middle, beneath his vest, wishing he possessed a proper belt. Possibly he derived more mental satisfaction than physical ease from the twine, for when he sat down it distinctly pained him, and he had to slacken it. From another pocket he extracted a bundle of printed paper, rubbed and tattered and soiled. It had originally cost one penny, and had passed through many hands. Jock had got the loan of it from another boy, after promising faithfully to take good care of it and return it, as the other boy was under obligation to return it to a third, who may not have been the original lender.

Jock unfolded the paper with great caution. The first page was in a sad state, but the title was not quite obliterated, while some of the pictures were still visible.

Jack Transome; or The Gentleman Pirate, was the title, and under the remnant of the illustration was printed: "'Dastard!' shouted Jack, and, waving his cutlass, sprang upon the poop."

Jock had already read the story five times, but its charm was as strong as ever, none the less so because the names Jack and Jock were so like each other. And Jack Transome was truly a most noble character; he robbed only the wicked rich, and was ever ready to succour the virtuous poor. He was bold and honest, and did not play shabby, underhand tricks on his bitterest enemies.

Jock, as he began to read, was glad he had not

smashed the waxen fruits, for he realised that the Gentleman Pirate would never have done such a thing, even had the G. P.'s aunt refused him dinner. Moreover, Jock blushed with shame at the memory of the potato, for had not his hero declared, on more than one occasion, that the man who could strike a defenceless woman must be a diabolical coward. Jock was not sure of the meaning of "diabolical," but the word had a medicinal sound, and must therefore mean something exceedingly unpleasant.

"At four bells Captain Jack came on deck after his brief and much-needed repose. He gazed long and earnestly through his glass; then, as he removed it from his clear blue eye, he remarked to the steersman: 'We're gaining on her, Sam.' The grizzled sailor shifted his quid, and, with an affectionate glance at his beloved young skipper, replied, 'Ay, ay, sir!' Just at that moment——"

The reader crushed up the paper and stuffed it into his pocket. The key turned in the lock, the door opened, and Miss Wishart said quietly:

"Come to yer tea, Jock."

The boy obeyed in wonder as well as with alacrity. It was not near the usual hour for tea.

"Wash yer hauns an' face," said the woman as he entered the kitchen, "an' brush yer hair."

Having performed his toilet, the boy took his place at the table, which was now covered with a coarse but snowy cloth and laid with cheap but shining dishes.

After repeating a lengthy grace the aunt poured out tea. Then from a pan on the hob she fished an egg, and from the oven brought a plate of fried potatoes. She set both before her nephew.

"Eat slow," she said, "or ye'll maybe hurt yersel'."

Neither her face nor her voice softened. The boy gave her one awkward glance and dropped his eyes.

Again he felt glad that he had stayed the fall of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, but shame was mingled with the satisfaction. In silence he began to eat. The merest hint of tenderness on the woman's part just then would have started a flood of regrets from the heart of the boy.

"Eat slow," she said again, and sipped the tea from her saucer.

Jock pushed the fried potatoes towards her.

"Are ye no' for ony?" he asked, with an effort.

She shook her head. "I had ma dinner," she muttered.

It was now plain to the boy that she had really made the tea early for his sake. He struggled to express his regrets, but——

"I've had plenty tatties the day," she added grimly. . . . If she had only smiled then!

Jock choked slightly.

"Eat slow," she repeated once more, mechanically.

Thereafter the boy was fain to gobble his food and be done with it.

He sat by the hearth while his aunt washed the dishes. When that was over and the kitchen in perfect order, she called him to her at the window.

"I seen ye had gotten pent on your jayket. That's what ye get wi' runnin' about the docks. Come here till I see if terpertine'll tak' it aff. Hoo cam' ye to get pent on yer jayket?"

"I got it on a boat," he replied, off his guard.

"On a boat! An' what was ye daein' on a boat? Was ye no feart the boat wud sail awa' wi' ye?"

"I—I wisht it had!"

"Ye wisht it had? Oh, ye bad, stupid boy! . . . Noo, tak' the things oot yer pooches till I clean yer jayket. Haste ye noo! This pooch—what's in it?"

Jock hesitated—and was lost. The next moment

his aunt jerked sharply forth *Jack Transome; or The Gentleman Pirate*.

"What's this? . . . Oh! ha'e I no' warned ye no' to read sic evil trash?" She glared at the paper.

"Dinna waste it," cried Jock. "It's no' mines. I promised to gi'e it back to Jamie M'Meekin."

"An' I've tell't ye no' to gang wi' Jamie M'Meekin. He's no' a nice boy. But him an' you'll be better wantin' this trash." So saying, she tore the paper in pieces and flung them on the fire.

"I—I hate ye!" screamed the boy.

If the woman winced, it was but slightly.

"Ha'e ye ony mair o' that trash on ye?" she demanded. "Aweel, dinna let me catch ye readin' the like again. I tell ye, ye'll never grow to be a guid man if ye stap yer heid wi' trash, an' gang about wi' boys like thon M'Meekin laddie. Mind that!" She poured a little turpentine on a scrap of flannel. "Keep still till I get at the pent."

"I wisht ma fayther wud come back," he said, checking a sob.

"I wisht he wud! But I doobt he'll be vexed to hear o'——"

"He wudna be vexed. He wud let me gang wi' Jamie, an' he wud let me read stories, an' he wud let me gang oot efter tea, an'——"

"Whisht!"

There was silence until the last of the paint was removed. Then Jock carelessly remarked that he was going out for a little while.

"Na," said his aunt decidedly. "Ye've been oot plenty the day. I'll gi'e ye the new *Missionary Mail* to read, an' ye'll jist rest yersel' till it's time to gang to the prayer meetin' wi' me. This is Wednesday, ye ken."

Jock made a grimace. "I dinna want to read the

Missionary Mail; I dinna want to gang to the prayer meetin'."

"When ye're a man ye'll be gled ye did baith."

"When I'm a man—I'll be a pirate!" he declared wildly.

"A what?"

"A pirate!"

"Tits, laddie! Dinna haver!"

"I'm no' haverin'! An' I want to gang oot noo. I—I was to gi'e Jamie back his paper—the paper ye—ye stole."

"Jock!" she said sternly, "dinna dare to repeat that. Ye canna gang oot the nicht."

"I—I'll come back in time for the meetin'."

Miss Wishart shook her head and proceeded to put away the turpentine.

"If ye dinna let me gang oot," said the boy furiously, "I'll—I'll dae something ye winna like."

"I never break ma word," she returned without any emotion. "Ye maun learn to be obedient. Some day ye'll maybe understan' that I kent best what was guid for ye. See! there's the new *Missionary Mail*——"

Jock dashed the paper from her hand and rushed from the kitchen into the parlour. As the Gentleman Pirate had been consumed by fire, so had Jock's nobler aspirations been burnt up by hate. Seizing the *Pilgrim's Progress*, raising it as high as he could reach, he let it fall upon the case of waxen fruits. To his ears the moderate crash was appalling. For an instant he stood stunned. Then he backed away to the furthest corner of the room, and, leaning against the wall, stared stupidly at the ruin he had wrought.

"What was that noise?"

Miss Wishart stood in the doorway.

"What——"

Her voice failed; her face went white; her fingers

gripped the edge of the door. To the shivering boy she seemed to swell and then collapse, to grow smaller than ever he had seen her.

Slowly she lifted her eyes from the wreckage; for a moment they rested on Jock, and a quiver passed over her face.

"An' it was ma mither's pride," she murmured, and went shuffling from the room. A minute later she came back.

"Ye can gang oot, if ye want," she said in a colourless tone of voice, without looking at him. Once more she retired, and Jock heard the kitchen door close behind her.

He turned his face to the wall. Was this the sweetness of revenge? . . .

In the kitchen Miss Wishart was on her knees.

"O Lord, I didna mean for him to hate me," she muttered over and over again.

An hour dragged past. The boy got his cap and stole from the house.

He avoided the usual haunts of Jamie M'Meekin and the other lads of his acquaintance, not altogether because of the destruction of the *Gentleman Pirate*, for which he would have to account. He desired to reach the docks unobserved—to make another desperate effort for what he imagined to be freedom. So far he had been less lucky than the boys of whom he had read, the boys who had won safely to sea at the very first attempt. But he was going to try again. Most of the labour at the quayside would soon be over for the day, and he might manage to slip on board a vessel. And after? Well, none of the boys in the stories had died of starvation; true, they had all been compelled to face an angry captain and afterwards work tremendously hard; but eventually they had become captains themselves.

Yet Jock's reason for flight had changed—though perhaps he did not fully realise how much—since the morning. Then and previously he had sought to escape from his aunt's restraint; now he fled because that restraint had been removed. Shame and the belief that she would be glad to be rid of him took the place of the old resentment, and it was with difficulty that he kept a stiff upper lip as he hurried along. Indeed, when he turned into the Broomielaw, and saw the towering masts and funnels of many hues, his eyes began to blink in a most annoying fashion, and he was compelled to halt at the barred window of a money-changer, and pretend to be mightily interested in the coins and notes on view.

Having pulled himself together, he set out once more, walking quicker and quicker until unconsciously he broke into a smart trot. The dock was in sight.

All at once his arm was gripped. He cried out in terror.

"Jock!—surely it's wee Jock!"

He looked up into the kindly brown face of a big bearded man, with a great bundle on his shoulder. And all his troubles vanished.

"Fayther!"

"Was ye comin' to meet me, ma mannies?" his father asked presently.

Jock blushed and shook his head.

"Of course ye couldna ken," said the man cheerfully. "I dinna write, for I saw I'd be hame as quick's ma letter, an' I thought I'd gi'e ye a surprise. . . . Hey!"

The last observation was addressed to a cabby, and a minute later, to Jock's amazement, and for the first time in his experience, he was being driven in a cab. His father put an arm round him and poured out ques-

tions, some of which Jock contrived to answer. Already the boy's happiness was becoming alloyed. What would his aunt tell his father?

He had no words at all as they climbed the three flights of stairs, and when they halted at the door he was the most miserable lad in the world.

Before his father could knock, however, the door was opened.

"Ye've got hame, Peter," said Miss Wishart calmly. "I seen ye comin' up the street. Gled to see ye. Whaur did Jock meet ye?"

"Near the dock. It was clever o' him to guess I wud be there—eh, Marget?"

"Mphm!" Miss Wishart replied rather drily.

"An' hoo's a' wi ye?" inquired Peter, strolling into the parlour. "Save us! What a smash! Hoo did ye manage to break yer mither's braw——"

"Aw, never heed it," she said quickly. "It was a— an accident. It's o' nae consequence. Come ben to the kitchen. The kettle'll be bilin' direc'ly. I pit it on whenever I seen ye come roun' the corner. . . . Jock, rin oot an' get twa pair o' kippers. Here's the money."

After all, it was a happy evening for Jock.

When the boy had gone to bed, the father refilled his pipe and was silent for a space.

"An' so ye've got a ship o' yer ain, Peter," said Miss Wishart at last. "Ye're a captain noo."

"Ay," said Peter, emitting a long puff. "She's waitin' for me at Sydney."

"At Sydney!"

"Ay—New South Wales. Ye see, I didna tell ye a' the news when Jock was there. He'll get the rest the morn. But maybe I best tell ye noo." He brought out a pocket-book and extracted some papers. He handed one to his sister-in-law. "That's a pictur' o'

ma ship. She'll be tradin' between Sydney an' Japan."

Miss Wishart regarded the photograph without speaking.

"An' this," went on her brother-in-law, not without hesitation—"this is a pictur' o' ma wife. I got mairrit afore I left Sydney, but I thought the news wud keep till I saw ye."

"Yer wife!"

"Marget! I hope ye're no' offendid at me mairryin' again."

After a short silence she said:

"Na, I'm no' offendit, Peter. Ye're young yet, an'—an' I suppose it's nateral. . . . She's bonny enough."

Peter looked relieved.

"Ay, she's bonny," he said softly; "but that's no' the best o' her. She's guid an' she's kind. She'll be guid an' kind to Jock—I'm sure o' that!"

"Kind to—Jock!"

"Ay; for, ye see, Jock'll sail wi' me this day week, an'——"

"This day week!"

"I canna manage it sooner. I'm thinkin' ye'll be gled to be quit o' the laddie," he laughed. "I ken ye're fond o' peace an' quietness, Marget, an' I'm feart the laddie has been a sair trouble. But I'll never forget what ye've done for him an' me. . . . Are ye no' weel, Marget? Ye're awfu' white."

The photographs slipped from her lap, and she stooped to pick them up.

"I'm jist ma usual," she replied quietly. "But I'm a wee thing wearit the nicht. I was for gaun to the prayer meetin', if ye hadna come," she continued irrelevantly, handing him the photographs, and glancing at the clock. "It's near twal'. Wud ye like ham or haddies for yer breakfast?"

Peter declared his choice, and went to bed.

The week sped past. The hour of Peter's and his son's departure came.

At the last moment, Miss Wishart beckoned Peter into the parlour, leaving Jock, wild with excitement, on the stair-landing.

"I didna need a' the money ye've been sendin' for Jock," she said, and pressed a small bundle of pound-notes into his hand. "Keep it for his eddication, but dinna tell him."

Peter protested.

"Tak' it," she insisted, "or I'll ha'e to post it to ye, an' that wud be a waste o' money. Say nae mair. I've got a' I need. An', Peter——"

"What, Marget?"

"Ye'll see that Jock gangs to the kirk reg'lar, an' ye'll no' let him read trash nor get into bad comp'ny, Peter?"

"I'll dae ma best, Marget—an' so will Bessie."

"I'm dependin' on yersel', Peter."

"Weel, I promise. An' when I mak' ma fortune we'll a' come hame an' see ye. An' Jock'll write to ye often. An' some day he'll thenk ye better nor his fayther——"

"I'm thinkin' it's time ye was awa'," she said, moving to the door.

She took the boy's hand.

"Fear the Lord an' trust Him, an' ye'll never be pit to shame." Her voice quavered slightly. "Guid-bye, Jock. . . . Guid-bye, Peter."

She re-entered the house and shut the door.

"What wey did ye no' kiss yer auntie, Jock?" asked Peter as they went downstairs.

"I never done that. I think she wudna like it," said Jock, who had somehow got a lump in his throat.

"That's queer," remarked his father. "Maybe she'll be wavin' frae the window."

They turned and gazed upwards. But the window was blank.

VII

MR. LOGIE'S HEART

I

"AN' instead o' sittin' there complainin' aboot every-thing, ye should be praisin' Providence for a' it's done for ye."

With these words Mrs. Logie concluded her remarks, the delivery of which had occupied twelve minutes exactly by the kitchen clock.

"I've heard a' that afore," retorted the big, sturdy-looking old man, making vicious and unnecessary dabs with the poker at the bright fire.

"Can ye no' let the fire be?" his wife exclaimed.

"I've naething else to dae," he said crossly. "An' as for praisin' Providence, dae ye want me to praise it because yer kizzen dee'd last year?"

"Mockery ill becomes ye, Sam," she replied sternly.

"There's nae mockery aboot it. Guid kens I wish yer kizzen was leevin' yet, though I never seen him. But seein' he had to dee, I wish he had left his siller to the King o' the Cannibal Islands, or——"

"I jist hope ma puir kizzen Weeliam canna hear ye noo. Yer ingratitude wud gi'e a sair hert even to an angel."

"Strikes me," said Mr. Logie, letting the poker fall with a clatter on the fender—"strikes me yer kizzen's liker to be laughin' at you an' me."

"Laughin'?"

"Ay; at the trick his siller played on us."

"Samuel Logie!" she cried indignantly, "where

wud ye be the noo, if it hadna been for the siller?"

"At ma work, wife—at ma work," he answered, half wrathfully, half wistfully. "I tell ye, Janet, that siller has been a curse, an' naething but a curse."

Mrs. Logie restrained her temper, which was rather a brisk one.

"Ye ken fine ye're jist haverin', Sam. Read yer novelle an' content yersel'." Glancing at the clock, she added: "It's time I was makin' the tea. I'll get ye yer sustainer."

Mr. Logie sent a paper-covered volume fluttering across the room. "I'm sick o' novelles, an' I'm sick o' meddicines, an' I'm——"

"Whisht, man, whisht! Dinna excite yersel'. It's bad for yer hert."

"Oh, haud yer tongue aboot ma hert," he shouted. "There's naething wrang wi' ma hert, an' never was."

"Weel, weel; ha'e it yer ain way," she said, in a voice meant to be soothing.

"But I'm tellin' ye there's naething wrang wi' ma hert. D'ye hear me, Janet?"

"Ay, I hear ye, dearie," she murmured, hoping the neighbours did not. During the past year she had had frequent occasion to deal with his fractious moods; but this looked like open rebellion, and she felt unprepared.

"An' d'ye hear me tellin' ye?" he roared, "there never *was* onything wrang wi' ma hert—*never!*"

"Jist that—jist that," she muttered agreeably, and peeped through the window screen. It was growing dark, and to her relief none of the villagers appeared to be abroad. "Weel, Sam," she said presently, "wud ye like yer sustainer in a spune, or a gless, or a egg-cup, this time?"

"I wud prefer it tied up in a bit paper," he sourly replied.

She brought it in an egg-cup—the most novel method of administration she had been able to invent. At first he made as if to throw it into the fire, but, catching her eye, he grunted and swallowed the brown mess at a gulp.

"Janet!" he announced abruptly, "I'm gaun oot to seek a job the morn's mornin'."

Her wrinkled countenance lost some of its healthy russet colour, but she retorted firmly—

"Ye best no' try it!"

"But there's naething wrang wi' me," he protested.

"Ha'e ye forgot what the bookie says?" she demanded.

Under his breath he consigned "the bookie" to the infernal regions.

"What's that ye said, Samuel?"

"Ach! I wish we had never seen the bookie!" he snapped.

"Deed, man, ye're awfu' crabbit the nicht," she sighed. "I doobt ye'll ha'e to get a dose o' the other bottle afore ye gang to yer bed."

"De'il tak' yer dirty wee bottles! What I'm needin' is a big bottle o' whusky an' a pipe."

Mrs. Logie threw up her hands in horror.

"An' a day at the curlin' when the frost's here. An' reg'lar work at other times," he added.

"Oh, but ye ken ye canna get thae things," she said gently. "I wish ye could. But ye mind what the bookie says? 'The patient must avoid all pheelsical strain and mental excitement.'" She had the words by heart.

"Am I never to get ma tea?" he exclaimed impatiently.

Shortly after the receipt of the legacy by his spouse, Mr. Logie, who followed the trade of stonemason, had

been seized with the conviction that he was not quite well. He was then in his sixty-seventh year, and, along with Mrs. Logie, held in profound distrust the medical profession, probably because, in spite of the doctors, every one died sooner or later. Mr. Logie diagnosed his own trouble, stated it plainly as "something wrang wi' ma inside," and tried several homely remedies, without, perhaps, giving any one of them a fair trial. Mrs. Logie consulted her neighbours about her man's condition, and from one of them obtained a booklet which the neighbour had received from a sister-in-law, who had picked it up in a railway carriage. To be brief, the booklet informed Mr. Logie that he was the owner of a weak heart.

The grief and dismay of the old couple were intense, but gradually they began to take comfort from the very thing that had stricken the blow. The booklet did not, to be sure, hold out any hope of a weak heart becoming strong, but it did show how a weak heart might be prevented from becoming weaker. The patient, as Mrs. Logie often quoted, must needs avoid "all physical strain and mental excitement," and, further, must abstain from alcohol and tobacco. It was then that the Logies blessed the cousin whose legacy made them independent of Samuel's weekly wage; it was then, also, that Janet bought the first of many postal orders for 4s. 6d., to be exchanged for bottles of the "Sustainer" mentioned in large type on every page of the booklet.

Despite the shock of the dread truth, however, Mr. Logie took his trouble bravely, giving up his pipe and modest glass in a way that won the admiration of his neighbours, though he was apt to be rather irritable of an evening when alone in his wife's company. He went out only when the weather was very fine, and his walk was cautious and slow. For a couple of months

or so the neighbours could not pay him enough attention, regarding him with a sort of awe-stricken veneration as the man who might "drap deid" at any moment. They visited him at all hours of the day, and kept him company by the kitchen fireside and, not infrequently, at the kitchen table. Sometimes they brought little gifts of farm produce, or lent him volumes of distant date, tattered or well-preserved, which they might not have read themselves. Mr. Logie received their visits and offerings with a lofty dignity, and discussed his symptoms—which, to tell the truth, were not nearly so terrifying as his hearers could have desired—with something approaching satisfaction, if not positive pride.

But time went on, and, as Mr. Logie went on also, the fickleness of human interest became all too apparent. His neighbours gradually ceased their visits, gifts, and loans; they even forgot, when they met him in the village, to inquire after his heart. And he, in his turn, grew apt to forget their past kindnesses, and was ready to take offence if any one ventured a joke in his presence. Altogether, at the end of a twelve-month from the discovery of "the bookie," he was fast becoming a miserable old man and making his wife a wretched old woman.

While they were at tea the postman brought a letter directed to Mrs. Logie. As the old couple had seven children, now settled in different parts of the country, letters were not exactly rare occurrences, yet the receipt of one always caused a little flutter.

"Whaur's ma specs?" cried Mrs. Logie.

"Never heed yer specs," said her husband, with some eagerness, "I'll read it."

"Na, na. I maun read it masel'. It's for me, ye ken." And she bustled about in search of the mislaid

spectacles, while Mr. Logie made impatient remarks and suggestions.

"Ye're aye lossin' yer specs. Can ye no' keep them aye in the same place? When had ye them on last? I believe I seen ye gaun oot to the hen-hoose wi' them on. Ye'll ha'e left them in a nest likely, an' the hen'll be layin' gless eggs!"

Mrs. Logie was too anxious in her search to laugh, and the omission annoyed Samuel.

"A fine thing it wud be if the letter had been a telegram and somebody waitin' on a reply! Guid-sake! are ye never gaun to find them? Can ye no' mind what ye did wi' them? Ye should tie them roun' yer neck. It's aye the same story—aye the same story!—ye never can find yer specs when—— Oh, ye've got them? Weel, weel, wonders'll never cease!—that's a' I can say aboot it. Wha's yer letter frae?"

"Wait till I get them clean, Sam," she said, seating herself and breathing on the glasses. "They've got something sticky on them. I canna think what it is."

"Oh, there's nae hurry for a day or twa. An', of course, the proper place to keep yer specs is whaur they'll get nice and sticky. Oh, ay! Ye should try keeping them in the jam-pot!"

"If ye dinna haud yer tongue," she said quietly, "I'll no' read ye the letter."

He was silent, and ere long she got her spectacles adjusted. But she conned the letter through before giving him its contents.

"It's frae Marget's man," she said at last, with animation in her voice. "Marget's got anither—a wee lassie—baith weel. That's Marget's tenth, Sam. Are ye no' proud?"

"It wud ha'e been better to ha'e been a boy."

"Tits, man! . . . There's no' muckle else in the letter, excep' that wee Johnny's no' been awfu' weel.

Marget an' her man wud like if we wud tak' him for a week or twa; but," she sighed, "that canna be."

"Which is Johnny?"

"Johnny's the seeventh. He's next to Rubbert. He's never been here."

"An' what way can he no' come here?"

"Oh, Samuel, ye ken fine! Ye couldna thole a steerin' laddie in the hoose. Mind what the bookie says: 'Avoid all pheesical——'"

"Havers! Let the laddie come. If he doesna behave, I'll punish him!"

"But that wud be pheesical——"

"Ha'e I no' tell't ye that there's naething wrang wi' me?"

She shook her head sadly. He had never been so difficult to manage as just now.

"We canna ha'e the laddie here," she said.

Mr. Logie banged his great fist on the table so that the dishes jumped.

"If ye dinna write this vera nicht, Janet, biddin' the laddie to come, an' welcome, I'll—I'll see about a job the morn's mornin'," he shouted, "even if it's jist breakin' stanes at the roadside." He paused, and suddenly his voice softened. "There noo, wife! Ye're no' to greet. Ye ken fine ye want to see the laddie yersel'."

"But—but, Sam, dearie, ye'll be awfu' cautious, an' no' get ony pheesical——"

"It's a bit mental excitement I'm wantin'!"

"Oh, but that's jist as bad."

"Aweel, weel, I'll dae anything ye like—if ye bid the laddie here. I'm no' in favour o' sudden death, auld wife, but I dinna want to dee o' readin' novelles an' suppin' meddicine—an' that's what I'm like to dae the noo. Bid the laddie!"

And so the laddie was bidden.

II

He came in the last week of the year. His grandfather wanted very much to meet him at the station, nearly a mile distant from the village, but his grandmother insisted on taking the duty—or was it pleasure?—upon herself.

“Na, na, Sam,” she said. “The road’s that frosty. If ye was sittin’ doon, ye wud never get up again.” She refrained from referring to the length of the road and her husband’s slowness of movement. “I’ll jist gang masel’, an’ you’ll be waitin’ at the fireside for yer gran’son. Eh?”

“Jist as ye like,” said Mr. Logie rather sulkily. “If I’m in the fire when ye get back, ye’ll ken wha’s to blame; an’ I hope ye’ll explain the matter to ye gran’son. Folk wi’ wake herts whiles ha’e faintin’ turns.”

Whereupon Mrs. Logie decided to ask a neighbour to meet the boy, and her husband, having vainly tried to reassure her that he had only been joking, cursed himself bitterly in secret and poked the fire viciously for a long dismal hour, while she made treacle scones, which she had meant to hold back for another day, for “the wean’s tea.” When the scones were made, she occupied the remaining minutes by running between the fire and the door, stopping occasionally to add some unnecessary touch to the tea-table, and begging her man not to get mentally excited, or advising him that there was as yet no sign of Johnny.

When Johnny did arrive—he would probably have been a vast disappointment to any people save his grandparents—a pasty-faced, spindle-shanked child of seven, obviously city-bred—Mr. Logie was seated by the fire, smiling blandly and stroking his long grey whiskers, of which he was, perhaps, unduly conceited.

"What funny whuskers! Are they real?" was the remark of the boy on escaping from his grandmother's embrace.

She trembled at what might happen, but her spouse laughed heartily.

"Come here, Johnny, till I gi'e ye beardie!" he called.

"Nae fears! I'm ower fly for ye!" retorted Johnny.

Mr. Logie laughed more heartily than before.

"Come an' shake hauns wi' yer gran'paw," he said briskly.

"Are you ma gran'paw?" asked the boy, advancing slowly. "I thought ma gran'paw wasna weel."

"Oh, ay, I'm yer gran'paw—an' I never felt better." He seized the youngster and lifted him upon his knee.

"Canny, Sam, be canny," wailed Mrs. Logie. "Mind what the bookie says about pheelsical——"

"Dinna fash yersel', auld wife," he replied, kindly enough. "I'll be carefu'. The laddie's no' heavy."

"Stop it!" exclaimed Johnny, in aggrieved tones. "Yer whuskers is ticklin' me!"

Mr. Logie roared delighted.

And so began the first really happy evening the Logies had spent for a year. Nevertheless, Mrs. Logie had her moments of acute anxiety, as when her husband started to joggle his grandson on his knee to the old refrain of "This is the way the horses go"—which form of entertainment the youngster, as a matter of fact, considered several years beneath him.

Johnny celebrated his first morning in the cottage by detaching the pendulum from the grandfather clock, the hands of which, to his great gratification, began to revolve at an amazing rate of speed, while it struck

the hours every minute. It happened, fortunately, before Mr. Logie was up—he usually had breakfast in bed, and hated it—and Mrs. Logie, in a fever of apprehension, explained to him that she had done it while dusting the interior of the clock; the first deliberate lie of her wedded life.

The morning being wet, Johnny was kept indoors. He was, however, equal to the occasion, and suggested—or, rather, insisted on—playing at Pirates. His grandfather, to his grandmother's dismay, assisted him to turn the kitchen-table upside down, and then obliged him by seating himself in it, in an attitude anything but comfortable for a big, burly old gentleman.

"You're the merchantman," explained Johnny, who was scraping about the floor, stride-legs on a stool. "An' I'm gaun to attack ye. I'll gi'e ye a broadside to begin wi'. Ready, present, fire—boom!"

Mr. Logie received a ball of newspaper between the eyes, and after the first surprise quaked and quacked with laughter.

"Noo I'm gaun to board ye," yelled Johnny, and would have cast himself bodily on the old man, had not Mrs. Logie, with a screech of alarm, rushed forward and snatched the Pirate into her arms.

"That's no' fair," complained the Pirate. "Two to one's no' fair. If ye wasna ma granny, I wud gi'e ye a broadside on the nose."

"Dearie, dearie," pleaded the old woman. "Ye maun be canny wi' yer gran'paw. He's no' strong."

"Aw, haud yer tongue, Janet," cried Mr. Logie. "I'm enjoyin' masel' fine. Let the laddie be."

"Will I gi'e *her* a broadside, gran'paw?" asked Johnny eagerly, as he squeezed up a fresh sheet of newspaper. "I'll gi'e her it saft-like."

"Na, na, laddie. Jist gi'e me the broadside." Which order Johnny promptly obeyed, causing Mr. Logie to

touch the point of his nose gingerly and then examine the tips of his fingers.

"Is't bleedin'?" the boy inquired, with possibly more interest than anxiety.

"Oh, this'll never dae," wailed Mrs. Logie, clutching her grandson. "Get up on yer chair, Samuel, afore ye suffer serious. It—it's time for the Sustainer."

"I'll ha'e nae Sustainer the day, auld wife!"

"Oh, Sam, dearie!"

"Aw, weel, onything to please ye." Mr. Logie, with unexpected agility, scrambled from the "merchantman" to his easy-chair.

Johnny forgot his sulks in the pleasure of seeing his grandfather swallow the egg-cupful of brown horror, and his delight was not diminished when the fact came out that, deceived by the unadjusted clock, his grandmother had administered the dose a couple of hours too soon.

The afternoon turned out fine and mild, and Mr. Logie suggested taking Johnny for a walk. His wife demurred, but without avail. She, however, made Johnny promise not to run away from his grandfather, and Samuel not to run after his grandson.

"What wey can ye no' rin?" inquired the boy when they had set forth.

"It doesna suit me to rin, laddie," replied Mr. Logie, remembering his out-of-doors dignity and caution.

"But ye can jump?" said Johnny hopefully, scoring a line across the road with his heel. "I'll try ye which'll jump the furdest. Eh?"

"I doot I canna jump either, laddie."

"Weel, can ye hop?"

"Na, na. I canna hop."

"What can ye dae?"

"Jist walk."

"Can ye no' walk quicker?"

"Na."

"What's wrang wi' ye? Are ye ower fat?"

Mr. Logie smiled ruefully. "Maybe I am ower fat," he said. "I get fat wi' no' workin'. But it's ma hert that keeps me frae rinnin' an' jumpin' an' so on. Ma hert's wake."

"I wudna like to be you," said Johnny.

"I hope ye'll never be," his grandfather replied dully. He was beginning to wonder if he had exerted himself too much during the earlier part of the day. It was one thing to talk recklessly of his trouble to his wife, when he knew that she would not allow him to do anything dangerous; it was quite another thing to think of it while she was absent.

Johnny found the walk, taking it altogether, rather uninteresting. The next day he made friends with the village boys, after bleeding a nose and blackening an eye on their account and getting a swollen lip on his own.

Mrs. Logie was relieved at the change for her man's sake, but he was more irritable and irritating than ever.

III

It was the last afternoon of the year. Mr. Logie, with the bribe of threepence, persuaded his grandson to accompany him upon a stroll.

"I'll gang wi' ye, if ye'll gang beside the water," said the boy.

Mr. Logie looked furtively around. His wife had left the room. He was not allowed to take the river walk.

"We'll no' say whaur we're gaun," he said under his breath. "Come on, laddie."

"Ye're walkin' quicker nor usual," Johnny remarked as they left the cottage.

"Am I?" said Mr. Logie, and immediately slackened his pace.

"I believe ye can gang quick, if ye like, gran'paw. I'll race ye to the corner—for a penny."

"Na, na, laddie."

"I'll gi'e ye a start."

"I daurna risk it," the old man replied. "Ye see, ma hert's wake."

"What wud ye dae if a mad bull, or a ragin', roarin' lion was efter ye?" inquired Johnny after some reflection.

"Guid kens," muttered Mr. Logie. "I doobt I wud cry on yer granny."

"She wudna be able to dae onything. The mad bull wud dunch her, an' the lion wud eat her up afore she could whustle. Ye wud be better to scoot for it, or speel up a tree."

"I dinna think that's a very nice thing to speak aboot, John," said Mr. Logie, a trifle severely. "This," he continued, more mildly, "is the road to the river. It's gey damp. I doobt I canna risk it."

"Come on! Dinna be henny!" cried Johnny encouragingly.

"Aweel, I've promised ye, so I suppose I'll ha'e to gang. But ye're to keep aside me, an' no' rin furrit on yer ain accoont, mind! The water's deep wi' the snaw meltin' on the hills, an' if ye was fa'in' in ye wud get droondit to a certainty."

"Can ye no' soom, gran'paw?"

"I could soom when I was younger. Ay; I used to gang in for a dook every day, except in the deid o' winter. But I've got a wake hert, laddie. I've got a wake hert noo."

They walked slowly along the bank until Mr. Logie, fearing he might overtire himself, seated himself upon

the step of a stile leading to a field. The boy seated himself also, but soon became impatient.

"Na, na, laddie," Mr. Logie said warningly, "ye're no' to leave me."

"But I want to see if there's ony fish in the water thonder." He pointed down the stream.

"Aweel, we'll gang thonder anither day. It's time we was gettin' hame."

"But I want to see noo. Jist you bide whaur ye are, gran'paw. I'll no' be long." Johnny laughed, and ran off.

"Come back, laddie! Come back this meenute!" Mr. Logie rose to follow, but already the boy was many yards away.

"Come back, laddie! It's no' safe!"

The old man moved forward.

"Stop, I'm tellin' ye! Johnny, come back!"

Johnny turned his laughing face, waved his hand, tripped, fell, and rolled over the bank.

Mr. Logie halted, threw up his hands and screamed.

Then he ran—ran—ran.

The boy was being carried down by the current, so that the man had a longish race ere he plunged into the river, after clearing himself of a heavy overcoat. When he struggled out with his unconscious grandson, the coat came in handy for the latter. With his burden he practically ran the whole way home.

IV

The young doctor came out of the little room where-in Johnny had been put to bed.

"The boy's all right," he said cheerfully, to Mr. Logie, who sat, a mass of blankets and shawls, by the kitchen fire. "How are you feeling yourself, Mr. Logie?"

"No' so bad, conseederin'." He had no faith in doctors for himself, but for his grandson it was different. Still, here was a chance for an exposure of medical ignorance.

"I say, doctor," he said, "can ye tell when a man's hert is wake?"

"I daresay I can."

"Weel, what d'ye think o' mines?"

"Yours? Why, you don't look a heart subject—after what you did an hour ago. But if you wish——"
The young doctor produced a stethoscope.

"What's that?"

"To hear your heart with, Mr. Logie."

"Aw! I thought ye could tell wi' lookin' at me. I used to be bothered wi' a pain—weel, no' exactly a pain—jist here."

"There? But—that's more like your stomach, Mr. Logie."

"Na, na! It was ma hert! . . . But fire awa' wi' yer black penny trumpet, an' see what ye can dae."

The young doctor "fired away," and shortly reported the heart to be as sound as a bell.

Mr. Logie said nothing at all.

"You couldn't have done what you did to-day," said the other, "and not have been the worse—probably so much the worse that you would have known nothing about it."

"Ye mean deid?"

"Exactly."

"Weel, I'm no' deid onyway."

The young doctor laughed.

"If you don't mind my saying it, Mr. Logie," he remarked, becoming grave, "take care of your wife. You gave her a great shock when you arrived with the boy, you know, and she doesn't seem to me to be too strong. Wants feeding up, and perhaps a tonic.

I thought you would like to know." It was perhaps not quite professional, but then the young doctor knew all about Logie and his heart—had known for months.

About nine o'clock that night Mr. Logie, who had been unusually quiet and gentle all the evening, announced his intention of going out for a few minutes. He returned with a bottle of whisky, a bottle of port wine, some clay pipes, and a couple of ounces of tobacco.

"It's the last nicht o' the year, wife," he explained, "an' ye maun ha'e a wee gless o' port jist to keep me comp'ny while I ha'e a wee drap whusky an' a smoke."

"Oh, Sam!" she cried, "it'll be fine to see ye enjoyin' yersel' again. But are ye—are ye shair it's safe? I ken what the doctor said, but——"

"It wasna the doctor; it was the laddie that proved to me that ma hert wasna wake. Is he sleepin'?"

"Soun' as a top."

"I broocht some sweeties for him, but he'll get them the morn," said the old man contentedly. "Are ye feelin' better yersel', Janet?"

"Me? 'Deed, I could dance—I'm that happy aboot ye, Sam."

"If it wasna for fear o' waukenin' the laddie, I wud dance a polka wi' ye this vera meenute, auld wife." He laughed, but it was a very soft laugh. "God! it's a great relief!" he whispered.

She got up and threw her arms about him.

"But there's a thing that troubles me," he said, later. "It'll be an awfu' job tellin' a' the folk that there was naething wrang wi' me a' the time. I'll be that ashamed, Janet, an' so will you. They'll be sayin' ma hert isna in the richt place!" He laughed feebly.

"We needna tell them that. We'll jist say yer hert's cured," she answered.

"'Deed, ye're the wise wife!" he said, and began to fill his pipe.

She got up and went to a drawer in the dresser. From it she took a tin box, and from the box a soiled and tattered booklet. She brought it over to him.

"What's this for, Janet?"

"To licht yer pipe wi', Sam!"

VIII

THE LIMIT

THE afternoon was so wet and stormy that Mrs. Burton, after she had dressed herself, made up her mind that no one would call. So she looked into the play-room and asked Bobby if he would like to take tea with her in the drawing-room.

"You can bet your socks I would," was his prompt reply.

Horried, she exclaimed, "You must not say such a thing again!"

"All right, mother; I forgot you didn't have socks. But you can bet——"

"You ought never to use the word 'bet'——"

"I've heard you use it."

"When?"

"One night you told daddy you would bet him a pound of molasses' candy——"

"You ought to have been sound asleep," she said, blushing.

"Couldn't get to sleep for you two talking."

"I've a good mind to put you in another room." (Bobby's bedroom was connected with his parents' by a door oftener open than shut.)

"Then there would be no one to waken daddy in the morning. I say, mother, is there a pink cake in the drawing-room?"

"I have not the slightest idea," replied Mrs. Burton haughtily and untruthfully.

"Why do you look like that, mother?—just like a hen taking a drink."

"Hold your tongue!"

"Why, mother?"

"Because I say so."

There was a brief pause, and then he said: "You're awful strange to-day. Have you got a headache?"

"No, I have not got a headache."

"What have you got?"

"Will you be quiet?"

There was another pause until Bobby sadly remarked: "I don't think I want awfully to have tea in the drawing-room. Hope you don't mind."

"It happens that I wish you to have tea in the drawing-room. I also wish you to behave as if visitors were present."

"Visitors make me sick," said Bobby.

His mother made a clicking sound of exasperation.

"How do you do that noise?" he inquired with interest.

"I intend," said Mrs. Burton, restraining herself and ignoring the question, "to give you a lesson in how to behave when visitors call."

"But there aren't any visitors."

"We shall pretend——" she began stiffly.

"Pretend!" shrieked Bobby in sudden rapture. "Oh, what fun! Come on!" And he flew past her and downstairs, chortling.

It was not quite what Mrs. Burton had expected. A smile dawned, and by the time she reached the drawing-room her irritation had evaporated. After all, she had been annoyed with herself mainly for allowing herself to be annoyed with Bobby.

As she entered the room he greeted her with the announcement that there were two pink cakes.

"Are there? Well you shall have one—if you are

very good. No, dear, not both. I'm afraid they are terribly rich. But, first of all, I will give you your lesson. Go and sit down on that chair—no, the low one."

Bobby obeyed—with a plump.

"Not on the very corner. Sit in the middle, straight up, and don't sprawl your legs. . . . That's better!"

"It's not so comfy."

"Never mind about that. Now you are to imagine," Mrs. Burton proceeded, gracefully seating herself at the tea-table, "that you and I are sitting here, enjoying a little chat——"

"And a pink cake!"

"That may come later. Enjoying a little chat——"

"What about, mother?"

"Hush! You must not interrupt. Enjoying a little chat," she repeated, fearful of losing the thread, "when Jane opens the door and shows in a lady."

"Which lady?"

"Which lady would you like to have? Well, perhaps we ought to have a pretend lady——"

"Yes," cried Bobby. "Ever so much nicer than real. Let's call her Miss Mumps."

"Very well," his mother assented, after a little hesitation.

"Come in, Miss Mumps, and stir your stumps!" Bobby gaily cried, looking towards the door.

"No! no! no!" exclaimed Mrs. Burton, and suppressed a giggle; "you must not make fun just now."

"But Miss Mumps likes fun," said Bobby, who had already formed a very definite idea of the imaginary visitor.

"Well, perhaps she does, but we don't yet know her well enough for that. This is her first visit. You see?"

"I see," he said more soberly. "What next?"

"Let me think," she murmured. "Oh, yes. When Miss—a—Mumps comes in, you rise—not yet, dear, not yet—and wait until I have shaken hands with her. Then, when I say, 'This is Bobby,' you come forward and shake hands, and say very quietly——"

"Like a mouse?"

"Perhaps a little louder than a mouse——"

"A frog?"

"Oh, well, just in your natural voice—'How do you do, Miss Mumps?' "

"Mother!"

"Yes; what is it?"

"Why do people say 'How do you do?' when you aren't doing anything?"

"Why, because—well, that's a fine question to ask daddy when he comes home. Now we must get on." Mrs. Burton held up a warning hand. "Miss Mumps is coming in——"

"She's got on a green dress."

Mrs. Burton jumped up in a fright.

"A pretend-green dress," said Bobby, his imagination working.

Recovering some of her wits, Mrs. Burton took a few steps forward and shook hands with vacancy, saying, "Miss Mumps! How kind of you to call on such a dreadful day!"

"Go on, kiss her!" cried Bobby.

"Be quiet! And you've forgotten to get up."

"I'm up now." Of his own accord he came forward. "How do you do, Miss Mumps. How kind of you——"

"No, no! *You* don't say that. You wait until she asks you how you are, and then you say——What do you say?"

"Quite well, thank you, Miss Mumps."

"Splendid!"

"It's quite easy," he said carelessly.

"Now you may go back to your seat."

He went back.

Said Mrs. Burton, resuming her place at the table: "Miss Mumps is supposed to be sitting in the big easy-chair——"

"I see her!" He smiled in the direction of the chair mentioned. "She's awful fat!"

"Oh, hush!—and Jane has brought in the tea."

Bobby turned again to the big easy-chair. "Miss Mumps—do you know?—Jane got new teeth yesterday——"

"You must not say such things. Besides, you ought not to speak until you are spoken to. Always remember that. . . . I don't think I shall ask you to hand Miss Mumps her tea, but you may take her this plate of bread-and-butter."

Bobby came over for the plate. "I don't think she's bread-and-butter hungry," he remarked, "but I'll have a shot——"

"Be careful!" cried Mrs. Burton, as the plate tilted dangerously. "Oh, gracious!"

"All right, mother," he said reassuringly, as he picked a couple of slices from the carpet; "'twasn't the buttery side."

"Bring them to me, and do try to be more neat and careful."

"She won't have any," said Bobby, after shoving the plate where a real visitor's face would have been. "She says she wants a cake."

"Well, you may offer her a cake, but please try to do it nicely. Say, 'Miss Mumps, will you have a cake?' and give her time to choose one. Take this dish." There were two dishes, for she had expected a number of callers.

With a great deal more care than he had vouch-

safed to the bread-and-butter, Bobby bore the dish to its destination.

"Will you have a cake, Miss Mumps?" he inquired, with politeness that momentarily delighted his mother. In a whisper he added: "Any one 'cept the pink one, 'cause I've bagged it."

"What do you say, Bobby?"

"Wasn't speaking to you."

"What were you saying about a pink one?"

"Just said I had bagged it," he repeated, rather crestfallen.

"Oh, dear! But you must never say such a thing to a visitor."

"But what if she grabs my pink cake the way Aunt Jessica once did?"

"Well, dear, you can't help it if she does. Besides, I promised you a pink cake only if you were very good. Bring the dish and lay it carefully on the table, and then go back to your seat."

When he had done these things, she said pleasantly: "Please ring the bell, Bobby."

"What for?"

"Really, you are trying! We are going to have tea now."

"Real tea?"

"Of course."

He went over and pressed the button.

"Don't keep ringing like that, or Jane will be giving—at least, she'll be cross. Sit down."

At the end of a minute he remarked:

"This is rather stale. I thought it would have been more fun."

Mrs. Burton had thought, at any rate, that it would have been more interesting, but somehow she had lost the thread of the lesson, and many of its details seemed to have faded from her memory.

"One of the things you must learn," she said lamely, "is to sit still. You see, I'm supposed to be talking to Miss Mumps."

"Say something to her, then," said Bobby, with reviving interest, "and I'll sit as still as anything. Go on, mother!"

"Very well; only you must not interrupt."

"May I laugh?"

"There won't be anything to laugh at." Fixing her eyes on the big easy-chair, Mrs. Burton moistened her lips, and in a high-pitched elocutionary voice said: "Isn't this dreadful weather we are having, Miss Mumps?"

And just as the words were leaving her mouth the real Jane opened the door to admit a real visitor.

What Jane thought can only be surmised from the badly-stifled cackle which escaped her, as she closed the door upon herself, without having announced the visitor's name. As for the visitor, she cast a suspicious glance around her, doubtless in search of Miss Mumps.

Mrs. Burton started up, but her confusion was such that she could not recollect the name of the lady whom she had met frequently at a fortnightly sewing-meeting in aid of a far-off charity.

Bobby, retreating backwards and open-mouthed before this apparition of a stern-looking, very tall, attenuated person, with piercing eyes and an extremely long nose, was providentially led to his own seat, into which he fell heavily, bumping his head against the back so that the tears rushed to his eyes though no sound left his lips.

Then Mrs. Burton, producing a most inane smile, shook the lady's hand with absurd cordiality, and gushed: "It is so good of you to call on such a dreadful

day— isn't it? Will you have this seat? . . . Bobby, come and shake hands——"

"Wait till I blow my nose," said Bobby, with a tremolo in his voice.

Having performed the operation and dried his eyes simultaneously, he rose and advanced to the lady, now seated in the big easy-chair.

"How do you do, Miss Mumps?" he gravely inquired.

It was obvious that the lady did not like it.

"Oh, please excuse him," exclaimed the hostess, who had just recollected her visitor's name. "He doesn't mean to be rude, Mrs. Birley. You see, Bobby and I were having a little game——"

"A lesson, mother!"

"—pretending that a Miss Mumps had called. It—it was really most amusing."

"Indeed!" remarked Mrs. Birley very coldly, and without taking the slightest notice of Bobby, who lingered in front of her.

"You may sit down, Bobby," said his mother.

"But she hasn't asked how I do."

"Sit down, dear."

"But you said——" Realising that his mother was looking unhappy, he went back to his chair. A moment later he jumped up, ran to the table, caught up the plate of bread-and-butter, carried it safely across the floor, and presented it to the visitor.

"No, no, Bobby! Not yet, dear," stammered Mrs. Burton. "Wait till the tea comes."

Rather dejectedly, Bobby replaced the dish on the table and went back to his seat. He had done his best, and had failed to please. A smile from his mother, however, did something to comfort him.

Mrs. Birley, who had merely regarded him with a sort of sour curiosity, proceeded to talk at great length

on the subject of a recent sale of work at which, it seemed, neither sellers nor buyers had done anything like their duty. She was one of those people who, while crazily modern in some respects, cling stubbornly to certain antediluvian conventions. To give a single instance. She had gone through fifty years of life with the assumption that all boys were born rude and greedy, and all girls gentle and dainty. But as she had none of either, she may be excused.

Jane brought in tea, looking as though a mere touch would cause her to explode. She had had great fun in the kitchen, mimicking her mistress's unnatural voice and declaiming to the gas-stove: "Isn't this dreadful weather we are having, Miss Mumps?" But as every one in the drawing-room, including Bobby, was so unutterably solemn, she set down the tray steadily enough and escaped without a snigger, remarking inwardly that old Slim Jim (meaning Mrs. Birley) had evidently brought a hump with her.

For the ensuing twenty minutes Bobby's conduct may be recorded in the words of the schoolmasters as "very good," if not "excellent." Mrs. Birley, entranced with her own conversation, took that time to consume a small piece of thin bread-and-butter; and as Bobby had gobbled up his allotted quantity in about ninety seconds, he had a dreary period of waiting. And then she took another piece and went on talking, and the pink cake seemed as far away as ever.

So that it was with the greatest relief that he received from his mother a signal to convey cakes to the visitor, and with the utmost alacrity that he obeyed.

"Will you have a cake, Miss M-m——" He stopped barely in time.

She took a fearful age to choose; and, remembering Aunt Jessica, he became nervous regarding the pink cake. At last he could endure no longer:

"That yellow one's awful good," he hoarsely whispered.

"Indeed!" retorted Mrs. Birley, who would have construed any childish suggestion into an impertinence.

"So's the brown one; it's chocolate."

"Indeed!" repeated Mrs. Birley, while her hostess writhed in silent misery.

At last, with a sort of pounce, Mrs. Birley took a—white one.

Bobby was never nearer saying "Hooray!" at the wrong moment. With proud and beaming countenance he marched back to his mother. His confidential, questioning smile was more than she could resist.

"You may," she said softly.

Now those pink cakes have a curious magical quality. They go down in absolutely no time. Just when you are thinking of one, "Oh, how delicious!"—it has vanished.

Bobby wanted the second pink cake, which still reposed on the other plate.

Mrs. Burton shook her head. "It would make you ill, dear," she whispered.

Whereupon Mrs. Birley, whose ears were as sharp as her eyes, said, in her penetrating voice: "My dear Mrs. Burton, permit me to tell you that you are entirely wrong. The cake would not make him ill."

Mrs. Burton looked as though she had not heard aright. "I beg your pardon," she said feebly, while Bobby turned quickly towards the visitor. Could it be that she was not so rotten after all?

"I will go further," quacked Mrs. Birley, "and say that all the cakes on the dish—all the cakes in the shop would not make him ill."

At this astounding statment, Mrs. Burton's pretty mouth fairly gaped; her son's expanded in a grin of

gratification. Undoubtedly the queer lady knew what she was talking about.

"But," continued the visitor, "he would suffer—suffer punishment for his greed." She pronounced the word "greed" as though there were a dozen "e's" in it.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Mrs. Burton, "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I'm not greedy," said Bobby, stoutly.

Mrs. Birley ignored him, as usual.

"The cakes are innocent, wholly harmless. One cannot blame the cakes because one eats too many. The pain is simply the result of one's folly and greed."

"How awful!" Mrs. Burton helplessly murmured, avoiding the other's terrible eye. "I never thought of that. But do you really think that one more cake would make Bobby greedy—I mean to say, if Bobby were greedy, would one more cake—or, rather, would it be greedy if one more Bobby—oh, you know what I mean, Mrs. Birley."

"Perfectly. But only his conscience can inform him as to whether it would be greedy or not." The speaker complacently finished her tea.

There was a dismal pause, and then Bobby addressed Mrs. Birley:

"Do you often have pains?"

"Oh, hush, Bobby!" wailed his mother.

Mrs. Birley's stare would have—and had—disconcerted many a child, but in Bobby's case it proved a failure.

"In your tum?" he supplemented without shrinking.

"Bobby!"

Mrs. Birley was so taken aback that before she knew it she had indignantly ejaculated, "Certainly not!" She was about to add that he was the rudest boy in her experience, when he said:

"Not even long ago—when you was a little girl?"

"Bobby, leave the room at once!" cried Mrs. Burton, almost in tears.

"I'm just going," he said, keeping his gaze on Mrs. Birley. "Never?"

She lost her head. "No, never!" she snapped. "And I must say——"

"Then you must have had a rotten time!" said Bobby, with lofty pity. Then realising, perhaps, that he had made a mess of things, and with an appealing glance at his mother, he ran from the room.

The apologising of a mother is a sorry affair, and it shall not be described here. Enough to say that in the end Mrs. Birley was persuaded to accept another cup of tea and another cake, while Mrs. Burton recklessly promised to do all sorts of things for the next sale of work.

When Mrs. Burton went up to the play-room she found her son seated in a corner with a book of comical beasts on his knees, and with reddened eyelids.

"Oh, Bobby, how could you disgrace me so?" she cried.

"I c-couldn't help it. It was her fault, too."

Mrs. Burton sighed, possibly in agreement. "I'm sure I don't know how I'm going to forgive you," she said presently.

"Neither do I." He blinked, and two fresh tears appeared. "Unless you do it the same way as l-last time."

It would appear that she got over the difficulty somehow, for at the end of fifteen minutes—which is quite a long time to a little boy—he made a hesitating inquiry respecting pink cake No. 2.

"Oh, dear!" she replied, almost guiltily, "I'm dreadfully sorry—though I ought not to be—but Mrs. Birley ate it. . . . But be a man, Bobby!"

After a moment or two he said bravely: "Yes, I will be a man, mother. And I'll just say what daddy would say."

"What's that, dearie?"

He cleared his throat. "Well, I guess this is the limit!"

IX

THE GHOST

I

MACGREGOR ran up the first flight of steps, walked up the second, and ascended the third and last with lagging feet. While he greatly desired an interview with Willie Thomson, who had failed to keep an appointment—the usual Saturday afternoon appointment—he shrank from an interview with Willie's aunt and sole guardian, and that not altogether without reason. Still, he was the sort of boy who does not easily unmake his mind. Arrived on the landing, he halted opposite the door of his chum's abode and gave a peculiar whistle. At intervals he repeated it with increasing shrillness, but without obtaining the slightest response. Strange! Was it possible that Willie had had the temerity, or "neck," as Macgregor would have expressed it, to go off on some ploy of his own? The bare thought angered as well as hurt Macgregor.

With sudden resolve he advanced to the door and tapped lightly. His mother had taught him to say "please" even in cases where nothing tangible might be forthcoming; and he generally remembered to say it to the people he didn't much like.

The angular and wizened spinster who opened the door regarded him with patent disapproval, and said acidly:

"What d'ye want?"

"Please—is Wullie in?"

"Ay."

Macgregor's countenance expressed relief, and his voice was more confident as he inquired: "Is he comin' oot to play?"

"Na; he's no' comin' oot to play."

"What wey?"

"Nane o' your business."

"But—but he promised," Macgregor stammered, abashed. "Will he be oot in a whiley?" he ventured.

"He'll no' be oot the day."

"What wey? Is he seeck?"

Miss Thomson's frown deepened. "He's bein' punished," she said coldly.

"What wey?"

"I'll 'what wey' ye, if ye speir ony mair questions!" she exclaimed. "I believe it was you got him into the mischief this mornin'. What d'ye mean by teachin' him to slide doon a plank an' come hame wi' his troosers destroyed? Tell me that!"

"I didna teach him. I didna ken there was a nail in the plank."

"Oh, ye didna ken there was a nail in the plank, did ye no'? Oh, indeed, quite so!" cried Miss Thomson with withering sarcasm. "An' micht I tak' the leeberty of speirin' hoo it cam' to pass that yer ain troosers wasna damaged?"

"Maybe mine's is better cloth," said Macgregor, meaning no offence. And, while Miss Thomson choked with indignation, he added gently: "Could ye no' keep Wullie in the morn instead o' the day?"

"D'ye no' ken the morn's the Sawbath, ye bad boy?"

"Weel, ye could mak' him gang to the kirk twicet. That wud punish him."

"Awa' hame wi' ye, ye impiddent wee rascal!" she cried angrily. "If I was yer mither——" She ceased with a gasp and a wild unavailing clutch, as her nephew, who had stolen up behind her, pushed her aside, darted forth, and clattered down the stair, yelling on Macgregor to follow. So astonished was the latter that he barely escaped seizure.

It was not until they had fled along several blócks and turned the corner that the pair paused, panting.

"I doobt ye've done for yersel' noo," Macgregor remarked sympathetically.

"I'm no' heedin'," Willie declared. "I wasna gaun to bide in the hoose a' day, because I had to wear ma Sunday breeks."

"She's got an awfu' bad temper."

"Ye're richt there! She's a crabbit auld thing. Ye're lucky to ha'e yer paw an' maw—an' to get a Seturday penny every Seturday. Ha'e ye got yer penny on ye?"

"Ay," was the reply given a little reluctantly. "But—but I'm savin' up." Many, many a Saturday had passed since Macgregor first made this statement.

"Ye could begin next Seturday," said Willie pleasantly. "If ye was buyin' gundy, it wud keep me frae gettin' hungry for ma tea, an' then I wudna need to gang hame until she had got her monkey doon again. D'ye see?"

Macgregor saw. "Come on then, Wullie," he said resignedly, and, taking his friend's arm, went briskly to the "gundy" shop.

"A' the same," he remarked later, as he divided his purchase in the seclusion of a dusky entry, off a quiet street, "Yer aunt's a bad yin."

"She's a' that. I wisht I could punish her!"

Macgregor gave a sage wag of the head. "It's no' easy to punish big folk. Ye aye get the worst o' it in the end. Mony's the time I wud ha'e liket fine to punish ma Aunt Purdie——"

"She's no' near as bad as ma aunt."

"She's no' far aff it. Did ever ye try to punish yer aunt, Wullie?"

"I yinst pit an egg in her bed."

"An' what happened?"

"It didna burst, an' I got a skelpin'."

"Hard cheese!" Macgregor commented. "Ony-thing else?"

"I yinst lockit her into the hoose." Willie paused and sighed.

"Weel?"

"She boltit the door on the inside, and she didna let me in for ma dinner nor ma tea, either. An' she made ham an' eggs for hersel'. I smelt them."

"Ay, it's no' easy to get the best o' the auld yins. Ye aye get back twicet as much as ye gi'e."

"Ah, but I ken noo hoo to punish her. I've got a rare plan," said Willie, with sudden hopefulness of look and tone.

"What's the plan?" his friend inquired, sceptically.

"Gi'e her an awfu' fricht!"

"Hoo are ye gaun to manage that?"

"Wi' a ghost."

"A what?"

"A ghost! She's terrified for ghosts!"

"Ach, there's nae sich things as ghosts."

"Wha said that?"

"Ma paw. An' I say it, tae."

"Weel, ye needna say it to ma aunt. She's terrible fond o' readin' stories aboot ghosts afore she gangs to her bed, an' then she has awfu' bad dreams. She read yin the ither nicht—I've got the paper at hame—

an' about three in the mornin' she commenced screech-in' like fun."

"Maybe she was feelin' badly in her inside."

"Na; she groans saftlike when she's that way. When I yelled to her to ask what was up, she cried: 'Oh, dinna let it catch me!'"

"An' what next?" inquired Macgregor, now keenly interested.

"Oh, she waukened up then, an' gi'ed me a lectur' for waukenin' her."

"Was ye no' feart yersel', Wullie?"

"Me? No' likely," replied Willie, rather too emphatically.

"I believe ye was. Did she tell ye what the ghost was like?"

"Na; but the paper tell't me."

"What did the paper say?"

"I'll no' tell ye if ye say I was feart."

"Weel, maybe ye wasna. What was it like?"

Willie glanced over his shoulder. The place wherein they stood was now almost dark in the December twilight.

"Come ootside, an' I'll tell ye," he said, and led the way to a street lamp.

"Was it a skeletin?"

"Na, na. It was a leddy. I forget her name, but she was gentry richt enough. She was aboot a thoosan' year auld, an' she had been a terrible bad yin in her time. She cast oot wi' her young man an' stabbed him wi' a dagger in his vittles. And then she stabbed hersel' in her ain vittles, but she couldna really kill hersel'——"

"What way?"

"I couldna say—but that was the story. An' every year, aboot the New Year time, she gangs aboot greet-in', an' flourishin' her dagger, an' askin' folk to tak'

it an' kindly stab her again so as to kill her proper. But she canna get onybody to dae the job."

"I believe ye! Ye wud sune get the nick if ye done that. But what was she like, Wullie?"

"Oh, she was fearsome! There was a pictur' o' her." Willie hesitated.

"Hurry up!"

"She was dressed in a lang white goon, wi' a big hole in it whaur she had stabbed hersel'; an' she had lang, skinny fingers; an' her grey hair was a' toosie an' hingin' doon ower her face; an' her eyes was like burnin' coals o' fire, an' her tears was rinnin' doon like b'ilin' gravy——"

"What?"

"I canna mind the words, but that's what they meant, something awfu' hot. An' she made a wailin' soun', an' whiles she gnashed her teeth. That's a' I mind."

"My!" exclaimed Macgregor, "she was a corker—eh?" A pause. "But it's no' a true story."

Willie looked up at the friendly lamp. After a few moments had gone he slowly said: "*She* thinks it's true, onyway." Then, abruptly, "Will you be the ghost?"

His companion was taken aback. "To frichten yer aunt?" he exclaimed.

"Whisht! Folk'll hear ye!—To punish her."

"What wey can ye no' be the ghost yersel'?"

"She wudna be sae angry wi' you as she wud be wi' me, if she discovered it."

"Jings! ye've a neck on ye! Ye can punish yer ain aunt, Wullie."

"But it wud be fine fun for you, Macgreegor, dressin' up for the ghost. Eh?"

Macgregor opened his mouth, but the objection died at his lips. His mind wavered. He was caught on

the weak spot of all normal youngsters. The idea of "dressing up" was too tempting.

"I wudna be a ghost like the yin in the paper," he said, after a little reflection.

"Ye can be ony kin' o' ghost ye like."

"I'll black ma face——"

"Ah, but I never heard o' a ghost wi' a black face. Ye see, it wudna dae to be comic-like."

"I'll no' be that, I warrant ye! When dae ye want to gi'e her the fricht?"

"Monday."

"That's Christmas Eve. It wudna be fair to dae it then. Mak' it Wen'sday. I'll be ready."

"But what are ye gaun to dae?" demanded Willie, not a little annoyed at seeing his scheme so completely annexed.

"Wait an' ye'll see," replied his friend, who had not the slightest notion of what he was going to do. "Hoo am I to get into the hoose on Wen'sday?"

"I'll no' let ye into the hoose on Wen'sday unless ye tell us what ye're gaun to dae."

"I'll tell ye the morn," Macgregor compromised. "Ye see, I'll ha'e to think about it."

"But I want to gi'e ye—advice," said Willie.

"Weel, you can be thinkin' about yer advice till the morn. Come on for a walk. I'm gettin' cauld. Hoo am I to get into the hoose?"

His resentment evaporating, Willie allowed himself to be conducted into the brightness of the main street.

"She gangs oot to the shops," he explained, "every evenin' about hauf-past five, an' comes back at six. Ye maun be watchin', an' whenever ye see her gang oot ye maun rin up the stair, an' I'll be waitin' to let ye in. We'll ha'e everything ready for the dressin' up. Then ye maun hide in the coal bunker—it's aye

near empty on Wen'sdays—an' when I hear her comin' I'll pit oot the gas. The fire'll be enough to let her see ye."

"But what about yersel'?"

"Oh, I'll pretend I'm terrified an' scoot frae the hoose, an' you'll dae the same—efter ye've gi'ed her the fricht. Ye see?"

"I see," Macgregor slowly answered, and just then a clock boomed six. "I maun gang hame to ma tea," he said.

"Ye'll be oot later on?"

Macgregor shook his head. "No' the nicht. Paw an' me's gaun to ha'e a battle at the draughts."

"I wisht I was you," sighed Willie. "I daurna gang hame afore nine, an' I'm gey hungry."

After a moment's hesitation Macgregor said: "Come on up wi' me, Wullie, an' I'll get ma maw to gi'e ye yer tea. But mind ye"—impressively, almost sternly—"ye're no' to bide a single meenute efter ye've had it! Will ye mind that?"

With a relieved expression Willie faced his friend and silently and solemnly drew the edge of his hand across his throat.

"Paw," said Macgregor, soon after his father had permitted him to win the last of several games of draughts, "d'ye ken any ghost stories?"

"Ghost stories!" exclaimed Mr. Robinson, amused. "Here, Lizzie!—Macgregor's wantin' ghost stories!"

"Aweel," replied Mrs. Robinson, intent on her sewing, "he'll jist ha'e to want them."

"Yer fayther's the boy for tellin' ghost stories, Lizzie," John remarked pleasantly. "I wonder if I couldna mind yin o' his."

"Na, na, John!"

"If Gran'paw Purdie tells ghost stories," Macgregor

observed, "they canna be bad for weans—an' I'm no' a wean, onywey."

"There ye are, Lizzie!" said Mr. Robinson, with a laugh. "What dae ye say to the story about the yellow-faced ghost that had horns like a——"

"Ay, paw, tell it!"

"John, if ye commence to tell that story, Macgregor gangs stracht to his bed."

"What wey, maw?"

"Jist because."

There was a brief pause, ere John said:

"But, Lizzie, Macgregor kens fine there's nae sich thing as a real ghost. Dae ye no', Macgregor?"

"Dod, ay!"

"Macgregor, ye're no' to say that word!" Mrs. Robinson said, with a severe glance at both husband and son.

"Weel, I ken there's nae sich thing as——"

"It's easy sayin' that when ye're sittin' at a cosy fire, wi' the gas full on. It's anither story in the middle o' the dark nicht."

"Dod, that's truth," admitted John regretfully. "I'll ha'e to think oot a story aboot a nice, kind, pleasant, comic kin' o' ghost."

"It wudna be a ghost if it was comic," said the boy.

"I believe ye're richt," his father agreed, all at once dejected.

"Wha was pittin' ghosts into yer heid, Macgregor?" Lizzie inquired. "Was't Wullie Thomson?"

Macgregor blushed, but contrived to answer carelessly: "Och, ay; Wullie tell't me a story he had read, but I didna believe it."

"What was it aboot?"

"It was—it was jist aboot an auld wife that gaed aboot wi' a dagger. She had whuskers on her face,

an' she was aye greetin', an' her tears was b'ilin' gravy——"

John guffawed. "The ghost o' a sheep's heid," he began.

"What nonsense!" said Lizzie. "I'm sure Miss Thomson wud be unco vexed if she kent Wullie was readin' sic trash. She's that parteec'lar."

It was on Macgregor's tongue to enlighten his parents on that point, but he suppressed the words just in time.

"B'ilin' gravy," said John, "is the best yet! Dod, it's you for the comic, Macgregor!"

The gratification of having so thoroughly entertained his father went far to assuage Macgregor's disappointment. He accepted the invitation to a final game, also the offer of a "daud o' taiblet"; and to Lizzie's relief the subject of ghosts was apparently forgotten. But even his father could not help him to win the game.

The consultation arranged with his fellow-plotter for the following day did not come off, for Willie was taken to church no less than thrice and was kept in durance with a copy of the "Shorter Catechism" throughout the intervals.

On the Monday afternoon, however, they met, and the meeting at first might have been described as an indignation one. When it had cooled down a little, Macgregor produced from under his jacket one of those old-fashioned round woolly mats which, along with a case of waxen fruits, or other "ornament," used to adorn the centre of many a parlour table. The hair was long and emerald green, a trifle faded in colour.

"I got it in a drawer," he explained, "but I'll ha'e to pit it back when I'm feenished wi' it."

"What's it for?"

"For ma heid. It'll look gey fearsome if I black ma face——"

"I never heard o' a black ghost——"

"The de'il's black, ye gowk!"

"Gor!" cried Willie, recoiling, "are ye for pretendin' ye're the de'il? Has he got green hair?"

"I dinna say I was gaun to be *him*," Macgregor said impatiently; "but maybe she'll think she's come for."

Willie brightened. "That'll be a fine punishment for her! Are ye gaun to ha'e a dagger?"

The answer to this query was delivered in a hoarse whisper. "We've a great big toastin'-fork in the hoose. I'll ha'e that."

"My!"

"An' I'll black ma han's an' face—a' except ma nose. An' I've got a squeaker thing oot o' wee Jean-nie's cahootchy sheep to pit in ma mooth—it'll mak' her jump! But you'll ha'e to get me claes. I wish we had a big black hairy rug like Aunt Purdie has——"

"We've got yin! There's a lot of hair wantin'. She bocht it at a jungle sale."

"It'll dae fine, Wullie. I jist wish I hadna spent ma penny on Seterday."

"What wey?"

"I could ha'e bocht a firework to set off when I was jumpin' frae the coal bunker."

"Aw, ye'll manage fine wantin' the firework, Macgregor," said Willie, who was becoming slightly uneasy at the elaborateness of his friend's scheme.

"It's a peety I spent it," repeated Macgregor mournfully. "If it wasna for the squeaker I could mak' smoke come oot o' ma mooth!"

"She wud smell the tobacco."

"I wudna dae it wi' tobacco. I wud roll up ashes in a bit paper, like a ceegarette, an' blow through. It wud look like smoke in the dark."

"Aw, I think the squeaker's best onyway. We'll

need a heap o' string to tie on the rug, eh?" Willie remarked, becoming practical.

"Ay, we best gang roun' the grocers noo an' ask for the len' o' some."

Which they did.

II

Miss Thomson, clad in her respectable but rusty outdoor garments, gave a final tidying touch to the hearth and set the kettle in that position which, long experience had informed her, would allow of its all but reaching "the boil" by her return. She put up her hand to lower the gas, hesitated and looked at her nephew who, seated in the arm-chair, was apparently lost in one of his school-books. Unusual sight! And in his Christmas holidays too!

"Are ye no' gaun oot afore tea, Wullie?"

He shook his head without raising his eyes, for all the world like a devoted student impatient at being disturbed.

For a moment or two the woman regarded him. Her harsh features seemed to soften a little. Was it possible, she wondered, that her scapegrace nephew had benefited by the three sermons of Sunday? Certainly he had been strangely subdued during the last three days. Could it be that this unwonted studiousness was intended to please her? She said nothing, however, and, with a final glance at the fire, went out.

At the closing of the door Willie got up, leaving his book on the chair, and proceeded to extract sundry pieces of string from his pockets, which he laid in readiness on the table already set for a frugal meal. No grin appeared on his face, but it is to be feared that his sobriety was due to dread rather than to conscience. He made a hurried visit to the other apartment of the

house, and returned with the hairy rug already mentioned. And then the expected tap reached his ears.

The arrival of the second conspirator dispersed the gloom, and fears vanished in the blaze of excitement. Macgregor was in first-rate spirits, and Willie began to envy him his leading part in the business. He even went so far as to suggest that, after all, it might be advisable for him to play the ghost, especially as he had some past acquaintance with the coal bunker; but Macgregor blithely if bluntly told him to go and chase himself; and being the weaker character he was fain to submit to continue with a good grace in his very secondary rôle. While Macgregor was burning a cork, and also a finger, at the firebars, he amused himself with the unusually large toasting-fork and the squeaker until commanded to put down the latter.

"If ye swallowed it," Macgregor remarked, "ye wud jist spile the ghost. Here's anither cork. Ye can be gettin' it ready on the fork. I'm gaun to dae ma face in a meenute."

"Hoo are ye gaun to clean yer face efter ye win oot the hoose?" Willie suddenly inquired. "Ye canna gang through the streets wi' a black face."

"I've got a wat clout in ma pocket, in a bit o' paper."

"My! ye're fly!"

Macgregor smiled, rather cockily. "Hoo are ye gaun to pit back the black rug wi'oot her catchin' ye?"

"Oh, ye'll ha'e to keep it till I get a chance. But maybe ye could manage the ghost wantin' it. It wud be safer if ye could."

"Did ye ever see a ghost in or'nar' claes?"

Reluctantly Willie admitted that he never had. "But ye'll ha'e to tak' extra guid care o' oor fine rug," he said admonishingly.

Macgregor was now at the little mirror at the side

of the sink, blowing on a fuming cork. "D'ye think I should leave ma nose white?" he inquired.

"Hoo wud it dae," said Willie, with an effort to be original, "to black yer nose an' leave the rest o' yer face white?"

"It wudna dae ava'! I think I'll jist dae it a' black. It'll save time."

"Weel, ye best hurry up. She'll be back in twinty meenutes."

"Richt ye are, Wullie!" And Macgregor applied himself to his make-up.

The result was quite satisfactory to himself.

"It'll no' be comic when the gas is oot," he said in reply to his friend's criticism.

And later on Willie was disposed to agree with the prophecy, for the completed "ghost" in rehearsing its emergence from the bunker, with the light lowered, was grotesque enough to be almost fearsome.

The "dressing up" was accomplished with few hitches and only two mishaps of any consequence. Macgregor ruined his white collar and, owing to inadvertence, the hairy rug got pretty badly singed, which caused the air to reek with a horrid odour. Happily, Willie recollected having heard that "the de'il" generally went about diffusing a smell of sulphur. At the same time, he opened the window.

The clock struck six as Willie nervously assisted his woolly friend into the bunker for the last time.

"Ye'll no' forget to turn oot the gas when ye hear her comin'?" said Macgregor, who was perspiring freely.

"I'm no' seeck o' life," Willie retorted, quoting the reply, overheard at a street corner, of a young woman to her swain's invitation to partake of a twopenny pie.

"An' ye'll be sure to leave the door open when ye dae a slope?"

"Ay," said Willie. "An' you'll no' forget the way to get oot o' the bunker? Push the lid up wi' yer heid, an' then shove doon the front, an'——"

"Ach, I ken fine hoo to get oot. Shut me in, quick! But mind ye dinna fasten the hook!"

"Nae fears! I'll see to the hook. Keep doon yer heid!"

Willie proceeded to close up the hinged flap and to lower the lid. The hook which had caused the inmate anxiety hung loosely from the edge of the latter and would, in the natural course of events, drop into its "eye" on the former. Willie, however, carefully placed it with the back of its curve against the eye, and after giving the lid a thump or two with his fist, announced to Macgregor that he was "as safe as a kirk."

"The coals is awfu' dirty," the ghost remarked.

"Doesna matter when yer face is black. Mind ye dinna hurt yersel' on the shovel. An' dinna mak' ony noise, for I've got to listen for her comin'. An' Macgregor!"

"What, Willie?"

"If she catches ye, ye're no' to say I pit ye up to it."

"No' likely! We'll jist ha'e to pretend it was a joke. But she'll no' catch me. Oh, dear, it's terrible warm in here!"

"Whisht! I think I hear something!" Willie flew back to the hearth, ready to turn out the gas.

A false alarm. At the end of a minute he said softly:

"Macgregor, hoo are ye gettin' on?"

"Oh, fine! Listen, an' I'll gi'e ye a tune on ma squeaker. Oh, dash! I've drapped it! Here, Wullie! Open the lid a meenute till I see whaur it is."

"Can ye no' tak' better care o' yer squeaker?" com-

plained Willie, more in nervousness than annoyance. He went over, and lifted the lid. "Hurry up! Ha'e ye no' got it yet?"

"It fell among the coals. I couldna help it. Ha'e ye a match?"

"Sh! She's comin'!" gasped Willie, and letting the lid fall with a bang, rushed back to the hearth, turned out the gas, and fell into the arm-chair, shuddering with apprehension. He heard the sound of a turning key, then the opening of the outer door. He wished he had never had anything to do with ghosts. And he suddenly decided to pretend he had fallen into a swoon. He sank back, closed his eyes and opened his mouth.

"Wullie," called the voice of his aunt.

Involuntarily he sat bolt upright, amazed at the unwonted mildness of her tone.

"Wullie, come here, I want ye." Her tone was still milder—almost diffident.

Evidently she was waiting at the outer door, which she had not closed. But why?

Willie found himself unable to move. A scuffling sound, ending in a thump, came from the bunker, and he nearly screamed. Presently he heard his aunt approaching. He did not move when she opened the door.

"Mercy! He's gaun oot, efter a'," she said—and sighed.

Then she caught sight of him in the firelight.

"What's ado, Wullie? What for did ye pit oot the gas? Was ye sleepin'?"

"Ay."

A creak came from the bunker; but her hearing was indifferent.

"Are ye no' weel?"

"I—I'm fine."

She peered at his averted face.

"Wullie," she said slowly, "was ye trying for to—to save the gas?"

He wriggled uneasily, a movement of modesty it might have been, and she accepted it as such.

"Ye're a guid laddie," she said, and turned to lay several flimsily covered parcels on the table. "I'm gled I thocht to gi'e ye a treat," she went on, somewhat haltingly. "When I was oot I gaed into the baker's an' bocht three mutton pies an' three Christmas pies an' three cheesecakes. An' so ye best rin as hard as ye can an' bring yer frien' Macgreegor Robi'son here for his tea."

She went over to the hearth and from the mantel-shelf took a box of matches. Yet she appeared to be in no hurry to light the gas.

"Haste ye, Wullie," she said kindly, yet with a touch of her old impatience.

But Willie sat still, as good as paralysed.

"Dae ye no' want Macgreegor?" she inquired presently.

"Naw," the hapless one blurted.

A distinct sound came from the bunker.

"What was that?" cried Miss Thomson, peering across the room.

"A—a moose, maybe."

"A moose? There's nae mice in this hoose."

"Maybe it was a c-c-cat."

"Hoo could a cat get there?" She struck a match and applied it to the gas, and blinked at the bunker. "The hook's caught," she said, relieved. "It wud jist be a bit o' coal slippin' doon." Again she turned her attention to her nephew.

"Mercy, Wullie, what ails ye?"

"Naething."

"If ye're no' weel, ye canna get eatin' the pastries."

"I'm fine," muttered Willie, his gaze glued to the

treacherous hook. And yet he was not sorry it had caught.

"An' what wey dae ye no' want Macgregor?"

"He—he'll maybe no' be at hame the nicht."

"Gi'e him the chance. I was thinkin' I had maybe been rayther severe on him the ither day—espaycially seein' it's New Year time. Rin an' see if ye can get him. Tell him I've got pastries for him."

It was here that Willie's few remaining wits departed.

"Macgregor doesna like pastries," he said.

From the bunker came a clatter, a rumble, and a voice, choking with indignation:

"Wullie Thomson, yer a leear!"

Then an awful silence.

Miss Thomson, who had gone pale, was the first to recover.

"Wha's in the bunker?" she sternly demanded of her unhappy nephew.

"It's jist a—a ghost," he mumbled.

"A goat? Hoo daur ye tell me sic a falsehood?"

"I said a ghost. It's Macgregor Robi'son. We only done it for f-fun."

"Oh, ye only done it for fun, did ye?" Miss Thomson's voice had lost all its recent kindness. "An' ye thocht to terrify me, did ye?"

Willie was about to reply in the negative, but Macgregor was before him.

"Ay, we did," he cried. "But I'm gled we didna manage it——"

"Oh, ye're gled ye didna manage it, are ye? Ye'll be stoppin' there for the nicht, I suppose—eh?"

There was no reply.

"Weel," she went on, "I'll just tak' the pastries roun' wi' me to Miss Jordan, an' her an' me'll enjoy them. But first I'll send the ghost hame. An' as for you,

Wullie, ye wee deceit, ye'll gang stracht to yer bed! Frichten me, wud ye?—an' me that nervous!"

She advanced to the bunker, undid the hook, and lifted the lid.

In the words of Hamlet, alas, poor ghost! Macgregor looked what he was—a dismal failure. We do not always realise how keenly a child feels the collapse of his scheme, nefarious though it may be. His eyes fell, his lip quivered.

"Ma guid rug!" exclaimed Miss Thomson in awful tones.

Yet worse was in store for the poor ghost. Next moment Miss Thomson stepped back to the nearest chair, fell into it, and began to quake in an extraordinary manner. Presently she emitted a sound so strange to Willie that the tears stopped short in his eyes.

His aunt, whom he had seldom witnessed smiling, was actually laughing.

She laughed and laughed, with frequent exclamations of "Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" until she was well-nigh exhausted, while the object of her mirth writhed and almost wept with humiliation.

But the laughter stopped as abruptly as it had started. Still breathless she said:

"Macgregor Robi'son come oot an' clean yersel', an' we'll ha'e oor tea. Wullie, pit the pies in the oven. Ye can say ye're sorry—after ye've had yer pastries. I forgi'e ye baith, though ye dinna deserve it." Then she went off again. "A ghost wi' green hair! Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I ha'ena laughed like this since ma sister had the whoopin'-cough, seeven-an'-thirty year back! Oh, dear!"

X

AN EARLY ENGAGEMENT

I

ALL the little girls were more or less impressed by the announcement made by Miss White, their favourite teacher, to the effect that she would not be with them after the holidays, because (blushing) she was going to be married; but none was quite so impressed as Gladys.

Gladys would have preferred to walk home alone that afternoon; however, Mabel overtook her before she had gone far beyond the school gate. They could not have been called close friends, but their homes happened to lie in the same direction. Mabel often said things that hurt and shocked Gladys. She was a rather sophisticated young person, though only a year older than Gladys, who was eight. Her parents were rich; her father owned several motor-cars, and he and her mother were restless people, forever touring or visiting. Mabel was not much more familiar with them than with the servants.

"Why did you blub when she kissed you?" she demanded now, with startling abruptness.

"I—I don't know," stammered Gladys. She might easily have answered that the tears had come because Miss White was going away for ever; but that would not have been the whole truth, and Gladys was still a stranger to the incomplete sort. She really did not know altogether why she had wept; she had not been awfully miserable; she had, in fact, experienced an ec-

static thrill when Miss White had uttered the word "married."

There were certain hymn tunes that produced a somewhat similar effect upon Gladys—when the organist played the melody on the vox angelica and the light was dull; they made her heart feel warm and big and her eyes wet, and sometimes her throat lumpy—though it was all delicious.

"You oughtn't to blub without knowing why," remarked Mabel. "I never do."

"I couldn't help it," said Gladys, wishing she were home, with all her five dolls to cuddle. "It must be lovely," she ventured, "to be going to be married."

"I don't think," Mabel returned coldly. "Besides, Miss White is miles too old. She has got grey hairs!"

"She hasn't!"

"Heaps of them, though she tries to mix them up with the others. And she has a red nose."

"It's only the least little tiny bit pink."

"Well, it'll soon be red—red like a tomato."

"I think you're simply horrid," cried Gladys with indignation. "If it was extra pink to-day, it was only because she was blushing." Defiantly: "And I'm fearfully glad she is going to be married!"

"Oh, I don't mind her getting married," said Mabel carelessly, "but I'm jolly glad I'm not her." After a brief pause: "I wouldn't get married for a million pounds. Catch me chasing a man all over the shop!"

"Oh, Mabel!" Gladys exclaimed, her resentment giving place to shocked distress.

"I say, Gladys," said the other suddenly, "let's take a noath."

"A what?"

"A noath. You are stupid! Let's promise each other never to marry."

"But we couldn't marry each other," said Gladys, not without relief in her voice.

"Goosey! I meant marry men, of course! Let's take a solemn noath. I'll begin if you like."

Gladys shook her fair head gently but firmly. "Oh, I couldn't," she softly declared.

"Why not?"

"Because I am going to be married. It's to be on my twenty-first birthday."

Mabel laughed sceptically. "How do you know?"

"Mother said I might. At first I thought of my sixteenth birthday, but mother said that was too soon, and, besides, I'm perhaps going to college then."

"But how do you know you'll get any one to marry you?"

Gladys was neither offended nor dismayed. "I just know."

"Are you engaged?"

"N-no. But I shall be."

"When?"

"Some day."

"I expect it will be smother evening," said Mabel, quoting the last housemaid but one.

"I think it will be in the evening," simply replied Gladys, who quite recently, in her mother's absence, had read the final chapter of an old-fashioned novel, and had thereby gained a faint inkling of a betrothal by moonlight.

Mabel was so taken aback by the calm confidence that she overlooked the density of her companion.

"Who are you going to get engaged to?" she inquired.

"I think," said Gladys hopefully, "it will be Bobby Burton."

"He's not well off," remarked Mabel, and seeing

that her words failed to have the slightest effect, she added: "Why do you think it will be him?"

"I know him better than any other boy."

"But does he admire you?"

The conversation had become so intimate that Gladys, with all her innocence, blushed. But she answered the question bravely—though modestly—"I think he does."

"Why do you think?"

"Once, when I was much younger, he told his mother that he liked the colour of my hair, and she told mine; and just before last Christmas he told me that he didn't like skinny legs—and mine aren't, even when I've got on my silk stockings."

"No, your legs aren't skinny," admitted Mabel, "but very likely you'll have a long illness, and then they'll get like sticks——"

"I won't have a long illness——"

"And you'll most likely be bald when you grow up—before you're twenty—because fair hair like yours always comes out—nurse says so—in handfuls—and she says, too, that men always know when you wear those wiggy things—so you had better get engaged as quickly as you can, for nobody will look at you when you are grown up." And Mabel paused in breathless triumph.

"I don't believe it," Gladys almost screeched. "And I wouldn't have your black hair for anything."

"You'll wish you had it some day. So you had better ask Bobby Burton as soon as possible to be engaged to you, and then perhaps you'll be safe. If you don't, you will die an old maid!"

Tears were rising to her blue eyes when it occurred to Gladys that she had caught Mabel tripping. With recovered confidence she said:

"I don't believe what your nurse says, and I think you're a silly, Mabel, because ladies never ask

gentlemen to be engaged to them. So there!" "It used to be like that," Mabel coolly rejoined; "but nowadays cook says, you can't possibly catch a man unless you blooming well chase him into a corner. I've heard her say it often, and she's married to the gardener—the one with the wooden leg."

"Well," said Gladys distractedly, "I think she was a horrid thing to chase a poor man with a wooden leg."

"He seems to like her well enough, but she says marriage is a frost." With an abrupt change of manner Mabel pleasantly added: "Perhaps you would like to take the noath now?"

Gladys could struggle no longer. For the first time in her life she positively hated. The emotion was too much for her. With an inarticulate cry of rage and grief she fled for home, which was fortunately near, as fast as her plump little limbs would carry her.

Her mother chanced to be out, and she ran straight to her play-room, seized her five dolls, and clasped them to her bosom. Gradually they gave her comfort and resignation, and she was drying her eyes on the dress of the shabbiest one, when a most dreadful thought struck her.

Must her five beloved children be for ever fatherless?

II

On her mother's return Gladys lost no time in consulting her on the subject of falling hair. Mrs. Marshall, naturally annoyed and indignant, only partially reassured her little girl, at the same time advising her not to speak to Mabel again if she could possibly avoid doing so. Gladys had prepared other questions, but somehow they would not come to her lips. She feared lest her mother might be still more annoyed, which shows that Mabel's sting had left a tiny drop of the

poison of self-consciousness. She managed, however, to ask a little later if she might invite Bobby to tea on the following evening.

"Certainly, dear. Shall I write a note, or will you run round in the morning?"

"If you write the note, mother, I'll take it round in the morning," Gladys replied, after a moment's consideration.

"Very well; but you must make it clear to him that it isn't a party."

"Yes, mother. Will you please have some meringues—pink ones?"

Mrs. Marshall laughed. "If you promise not to tell Bobby that he is going to have them. You don't want him coming here out of cupboard-love, do you?"

Gladys was puzzled as to what might be meant by cupboard-love, but she had an aunt who sang a pretty song about "Love in a Cottage," and she had also a cupboard in her play-room, and she thought of both until she became rather confused, and did not go to sleep that night so quickly as usual.

Now Gladys, for nearly a year, had had her mind made up that on her twenty-first birthday she and Bobby would marry. She could not have told you a reason for her belief. Certainly Bobby had never given her one. On the other hand, it had never occurred to her, until Mabel intervened, that any reason was necessary. She was not a very imaginative child, but she believed in fairies and fairy tales, and she found the good old tag—"And so they were married and lived happily ever after"—entirely satisfying.

She was fond of Bobby, but at times she was fonder still of the idea of marriage, so that, after all, Bobby may have been merely a means to an end. Yet she had associated Bobby with marriage for so long—a year is an age to childhood—that to doubt him was to fore-

see herself an old maid (it did not seem the least incongruous to Gladys) with her five children semi-orphans. No other possible husband entered into the dismal picture. Wherefore in sheer desperation, she determined to follow, to a certain extent, the unpalatable teaching of Mable. She would ask Bobby very nicely if he would be kind enough to be a father to her children, or at least become engaged to her; but on no account would she blooming well chase him into a corner. It was at this point that she fell asleep—to dream that all her dolls had changed heads with one another, and that her toy-cupboard was stuffed full with pink meringues that groaned, while seven little girls with no hair sang loudly to an old man whom they called “Mother,” and who was really a pussy-cat, and Miss White, the teacher, pointed out mountains on the wall-paper with a wooden leg.

She awakened in the morning none the worse, and, according to childhood’s blessed nature, did not remember Bobby until, at breakfast, Mrs. Marshall mentioned that she had written the note. Then she felt more excited than worried, though no less determined.

The note was addressed to Mrs. Burton, and the writer instructed the bearer not to go into the house at such an early hour, unless she were specially bidden. Within a few minutes, however, she was in Bobby’s play-room, conducted thither by Mrs. Burton, who proceeded to read the note.

“Hullo!” was Bobby’s greeting. “Have you got your Christmas holidays?”

“Yes,” she said, a little shyly.

“So have I. What did you come for?”

“Don’t be rude, Bobby,” murmured Mrs. Burton. “Gladys has brought you a very kind invitation to tea for to-night.”

Bobby did not look supremely delighted.

"Is it a party?" he inquired.

"No," replied Gladys, who was apt to become formal when not quite at ease. "Mother said I was to make it clear to you that it wasn't to be a party. Just you and me," she concluded, more freely.

"Bobby will be charmed," began Mrs. Burton.

"But I wanted to have Leslie——"

"Hush! I'll write a note for you to take back to mother, dear. Would you like to stay and play with Bobby this morning?"

"Look here, mother!" cried Bobby.

"Mother said I was to go back at once," Gladys said regretfully, with a look at Bobby that would have melted anything human but the heart of a boy of eight.

"Well, well, if that is so, I must not try to keep you," said Mrs. Burton, and hurried from the room.

After a long silence Gladys, seated at the window, ventured to ask Bobby, who was working busily at the table, what he was doing.

"Making a sailing boat into a steamer."

"How clever you must be!"

"It's pretty difficult," he admitted, with a wag of his head. "It'll take ages to do it. I'd have finished it to-night if I hadn't been going to your house."

"You could bring it with you to our house."

"But you don't care for boats, Gladys," he said, conquered by her magnanimity.

"I'm sure I could get to like them. May I look at that one—close?"

"Rather! But please don't touch anything."

She came beside him, and if she did not understand his explanations she was attentive enough to satisfy his conceit in his handiwork. At the same time, she was hoping he would ask a certain question. Unconsciously she snuggled against him.

"Don't push!" he muttered. But a minute later he

did ask the question. "Are there to be meringues for tea?"

She nodded joyfully. She had not told him!

"Pink ones?"

Again she nodded, and gave a pleased little giggle.

"Why are you so glad," he inquired, "when you aren't allowed to eat meringues?"

"I like you to have them."

"Well, I think you're jolly decent—the decentest girl I know," he said warmly.

At that moment Gladys felt so fond of Bobby that marriage did not seem so vital. And yet, if she had proposed to him then, he would probably have said "Yes" right away.

Mrs. Burton returned with her note, and Gladys reluctantly departed. It was not until she was with her dolls that marriage became once more the important thing. And she was still a little afraid of premature baldness.

III

Bobby's behaviour at the tea-table would doubtless have gratified his mother, who liked his going to the home of Gladys, if only for the lessons in good manners set by that dainty little maiden. He did not knock over anything, and took only two of the three meringues, although Mrs. Marshall offered him the third. (Parents have an amazing disregard for the interiors of other people's children.) Bobby felt pretty virtuous at his refusal.

When they retired to the play-room, Gladys graciously insisted on his proceeding with his marine engineering, and produced for his assistance sundry tools which she had borrowed, without permission, from her father's chest. Fortunately none of them were very

dangerous, but Bobby had never handled such splendid tools before.

He retold her that she was the decentest girl he knew, which once more had the curious effect of causing the end to change places with the means. Next moment he brought about a fresh reversal by inquiring what she was going to do.

"My children!" she cried, and flew to them. "They must be put to bed."

Bobby was used to hearing her refer to the dolls as her children, and it was long since he had hurt her feelings with unkind comments, though often tempted to make them. Becoming absorbed in his job, he forgot both dolls and Gladys.

She, seated primly on the old sofa, prepared her beloved ones for the night. But her mind was busier than her fingers, and now and then she cast furtive glances at the boy.

All at once she gave a little jump and a gasp. She realised that Bobby was sitting in a corner of the room, with his back against the cupboard. A gust of ideas assailed her. Two questions were finally evolved. Did it mean that she could gain him without blooming well chasing him? Could this be cupboard-love?

In a breath, she felt that the time had come! She was afraid, yet nothing would have deterred her then. Gathering her five dolls, dressed and undressed, to her breast, she rose, wavering a little, and crossed the floor until she was within a few feet of Bobby. There she halted.

"Bobby," she said, in scarce a whisper.

"What?" he returned absently.

"Bobby!"

He looked up rather impatiently.

"Bobby, will you be a father to my children?"

He stared.

"Bobby," she faltered, "I mean will you marry me when we're grown up?"

"I don't know," he replied, with small interest.

"Well—shall we be engaged now?"

"What for?"

"I—I want to be safe."

Naturally he did not comprehend.

"Wouldn't you like to be engaged to me, Bobby?" she ventured, after a pause.

"What would be the use?"

"D-don't you like me?"

"Oh, yes, well enough."

"Don't you think I'm rather—nice?" She had meant to say "pretty," but something made her substitute the other word.

"I think you're jolly decent. Only you're silly too."

"Silly!" she echoed, in a sort of wail. "How?"

"Well, you're a girl—but you can't help that. I think you're silly not to take meringues when you get the chance."

"But, Bobby, I'd get a pain!" she exclaimed reproachfully.

"That's sillier."

For a moment she seemed stunned. Then she went back to the sofa, deposited the dolls thereon, and without a word left the room.

Bobby put in an uncomfortable couple of minutes, and was much relieved by her reappearance. Her countenance wore a look of grave triumph.

"I say, I didn't mean——" he began.

"It's all right," she told him, "I've eaten it!"

"What?"

"The meringue. I stole it, and ate it—every crumb! Now will you be engaged?"

"You might have given a chap a bite."

Her face fell; tears rushed to her eyes.

"Oh, Bobby, you *are* cruel!" she sighed.

At that he sprang to his feet. "Please don't cry, Gladys. I—I'll do anything you like."

"Then say we're engaged."

"Oh, all right." A pause. "Is that all you want?"

"I think," she said, already demure, "you ought to kiss me and give me a ring."

"Haven't got a ring."

She had it ready. "I got it out of a cracker. Put it on this finger."

"Silly kid!" said Bobby, doing as he was told, however. "Is that all?"

"You haven't kissed me."

"Don't want to."

"But you must, because you've said we were engaged, and engaged people always do it."

"Oh, bother!" He kissed her chin. "You smell of meringue, greedy!"

She was far too happy to take offence.

"Now come and kiss all the children," she said briskly, taking his hand.

"Not likely!"

"Bobby!"

"Kiss rotten dolls? Not much!"

"Bobby! And I ate a meringue to please you, and I'll be so ill! Oh, please!"

"I hope you won't be ill. It's horrid," he said, in more sympathetic tones. "You were a brick to eat it—only I'd have eaten it for you. Well, I'll do it—if you won't tell anybody."

He ran over to the sofa and hastily saluted the heads of the five in turn.

"You're a dear!" exclaimed Gladys.

"Now is that all?" he demanded shortly, looking ashamed of himself.

"That's all," she answered cheerfully. "Now you

can go and finish your boat, and I'll finish putting our children to bed."

"They're not——" Bobby hesitated, then shut his lips firmly, and strode back to his corner. No use arguing with her!

And Gladys felt safe, also proud that she had not blooming well chased him.

"Aren't you glad, Maud," she whispered to her eldest child, "I didn't take a noath?"

XI

DICKY JOHNNY

I

AFTER but little delay the total earthly possessions of Richard Temple and Joanna, his wife—two of the victims of the Urania disaster on the Australian Coast—had been found to consist of forty thousand shares in the Hero Copper Mining Company, and a little boy called Dicky Johnny. It had further been discovered, after the least possible additional delay, that nobody wanted to buy the shares at any price, and that no one seemed desirous of taking the little boy as a gift.

The lawyer in charge, an old friend of the dead man's, had locked the unsaleable scrip in his safe and had written a letter to Mr. Winston Temple, the boy's oldest uncle. The ultimate result of that letter was the present gathering of the boy's uncles and aunts—they did not make a large company—in Mr. Winston Temple's library, a somewhat gloomy storehouse of learning.

The host sat at his writing-table, his left hand in his trousers pocket, his right toying with a spring paper-clip. He was a man of near fifty, big, powerful, almost handsome. His coldish grey eyes surveyed his relatives—a brother, two sisters, two brothers-in-law and a sister-in-law, also a cousin, a widower.

"Well," he said, breaking a silence, "has no one any suggestions to offer? Henry, you had better speak first."

Henry Temple, a meagre person compared with the elder brother, moved uneasily on his chair, cleared his throat, glanced at his wife, and shook his head. His wife spoke. She was a fair, slim woman with a certain hard beauty.

"I do not see that we can suggest anything, Winston," she said. "I presume you wish to find a home for the poor unfortunate boy, but you know that Henry's health——"

"Agatha," said Winston, "have you anything to propose?"

His elder sister hesitated and looked at her husband, John Rogers.

"So far as I am concerned," said he, "the boy would be quite welcome to stay with us, for a time; but as you are aware, Agatha and I have no abiding place at present. It is almost certain that we shall have to make a trip to Ceylon before many weeks have passed. I had hoped to settle at home for good, but things out there are not moving just as one could desire, and——" His voice trailed off through a mumble into silence.

"And you, Adela, have your own five children," said Winston. "No doubt your hands are full enough."

"I don't see why the poor little beggar shouldn't come to us," said Adela's fat and cheerful consort.

Adela frowned at him. "I shouldn't mind the trouble a bit," she said to her brother, "but the boy has been brought up in a way that I never could approve of, and even for poor, dear Richard's sake, I do not see that I should be justified in letting my own children run serious risks of——of——"

"Quite so," said Winston quietly, allowing the paper-clip to shut with a snap. "I shall take the boy here until I can send him to school."

Several of the company nodded, and some one said, "That is very good of you, Winston." Then everybody sat up in the way that people sit up in church after a very long prayer. The matter had been nicely settled, and their consciences could take a nap. And, after all, Winston was only doing his duty as the head of the connection.

"How old is the boy?" the question was asked softly, though abruptly, by the widower. His presence had caused some wonderment at the beginning of the meeting, but had thereafter been ignored, and Winston had not thought it worth while explaining that his cousin had invited himself to the meeting.

"Between five and six, I believe, Thomas," Winston replied.

"Have you any idea of what he is like?" The cousin, a dark, sad-eyed man of perhaps forty, glanced rather shyly round the company. He had nothing in common with the Temples save relationship.

No one had any idea. Richard Temple and his wife had been wanderers and had broken modern conventions pretty freely. Moreover, Richard was adjudged to have married beneath him; his relatives had received his choice but coldly on the only occasion of meeting her, and had presumed Richard to be ashamed of his choice because he had not brought her to see them a second time. As a matter of fact, Richard had been ashamed of his relations, or, at all events, of their manners.

There was a silence until the cousin inquired when the boy was expected to arrive.

"The steamer is due to-morrow about noon," Winston replied. "I have arranged to meet it and thank those people—I forget their names—for bringing Richard John from Australia. I have already written to

thank those who took care of him there after the wreck."

"Poor little chap! He must have had an awful time," murmured Adela, and the other women and one of the men made sympathetic sounds.

"With your permission," said the widower, "I shall be glad to give the boy a home and do my best to bring him up."

He paused for a moment, but no one spoke; even Winston was unprepared.

"I can promise for him only the plainest of living, but I will endeavour to secure his health, give him a decent education, and—some happiness."

Winston laid the paper-clip carefully on his desk.

"This is exceedingly good of you, Thomas," he said, with a kindness that scarcely covered the surprise and relief in his voice.

Without giving time for further remarks, Thomas continued: "But if you accept my offer, I must ask you all to entrust me with the guardianship—the sole guardianship—of the boy. I—I wish him to be just as if he were my own. Now I shall go into the next room, and you can let me know when you have come to a decision." He rose and passed to the door. There he halted. "You quite understand," he said, in a low voice, "that I require entire charge of the boy." He bowed slightly and went out.

They did not keep him waiting long in the next room.

II

Seven years ago Thomas Nairn had succeeded, chiefly for his wife's sake, in becoming a fairly prosperous man of business. But even as he was beginning to realise his success, his wife died ere their child was

born. Energy failed as at the snapping of a live wire; ambition collapsed like a rent balloon. For a few years longer Thomas continued in the City, buying and selling in a listless, half-hearted fashion, unmoved, barely interested by his clerk's reports and statements of steadily dwindling profits; then, lest he should bring about the ruin of others as well as himself, he caused his affairs to be wound up and, with what little capital remained to him, left the City, neither glad nor regretful.

In a far county, near the drowsy village of Alvarley that he had known slightly in his boyhood, he established himself in a little cottage possessed of a large garden. His early youth had been lived among gardens; years of town life had not stifled his love and knowledge of flowers; throughout all his struggling after money he had never relinquished the hope of making for his wife, and for his children, a home in the midst of a great garden away from the stir and stress of modern existence. Then, to be sure, he had not thought of Alvarley; had he thought of it then, he would now have made his hermitage elsewhere. But Alvarley contained in itself no poignant memory of his beloved, and offered such peace as is possible for those who must ever find memories in a blue sky, a perfume of violets, a bird's song.

At first it was enough that he should behold lovely things responding to his own labour and that of the assistant whom he employed. But as time went on, as he perceived how excellent was the soil, how suitable the exposure of his garden, he began to ask himself if he might not go farther and sell flowers as well as grow them. The idea gripped him, though it was the desire to extend his operations rather than the wish to make money that prevented his shaking it off. So when the first winter came he invested a portion of his

capital in additional ground and a cluster of glass-houses. Perhaps he sank too much money, for the three summers that followed resulted in losses more serious than he could well afford. Yet he gradually secured a sure market for his wares, and the present summer, so far as it had gone, gave promise of at least a tiny balance on the right side.

"I've got to make a profit now, anyway," said Thomas to himself as he filled his pipe by the door of the cottage.

It was near eight o'clock, and he had been out since five that fine July morning. But he had done less supervision and work than usual. In one of the glass-houses he had allowed a whole hour to slip by without touching the job he had intended to complete; and then he had gone to the sweet-pea garden to give the man there certain instructions, and had come away without delivering any instructions whatsoever. And now he suddenly realised that he was filling his pipe without any intention of smoking it. He returned it and the pouch to his pocket, and, moving to the cottage door, opened it cautiously.

Presently he entered the little hall and went on tip-toe to the kitchen. In answer to his whispered inquiry, Mary, his housekeeper, who had known him from boyhood, shook her head. He turned, but hesitated at the door.

"Won't ye go up, sir?" she said. "He's maybe stirrin' now, though he was sound ten minutes back."

"It would be a pity to wake him," said Thomas; "he must be very tired after the long journey yesterday." Nevertheless, he bent down and unlaced his heavy boots and, having removed them, went softly up the narrow stairs. On the landing there were two doors. That on the left was ajar, and, after peeping in, he pushed it open and entered.

"Good morning, Dicky," he said, and there was a deal of diffidence in his voice, although he and the person addressed had become good friends the previous afternoon.

"I hope you have slept well," he went on. "I—I hope I didn't disturb you."

The little boy in the big bed sat up; his bewildered stare became a smile of welcome.

"I forgot you was Mr. Thomas," he said; "I mean Uncle Tom." He put his hand in the man's and lifted his face.

Rather bashfully, Thomas kissed the rosy cheek and said, "Are you hungry? Would you like to get up now?"

"It's a nicer bed than on the steamer," the boy replied, looking reflective; "but I'm awful hungry, too."

"Would you like to eat something before you get up, Dick?"

The boy nodded. "But you promised to call me Dicky Johnny if I called you Uncle Tom."

"So I did. What would you like to eat?"

"Something very nice."

"I don't want you to spoil your proper breakfast," said Thomas, touching the tousled yellow hair. "I believe Mary has picked some strawberries. How would that do, Dicky Johnny?"

"Oh, jolly! With sugar and cream?"

"Certainly." Thomas went to the stairhead and called some instructions to his housekeeper in a somewhat apologetic tone of voice. Only the day before he had arranged with her that the young guest's food should be wholesome, but as plain as possible. "And we must begin with plain things," he had said, "so that the boy won't expect anything else." But now Mary chuckled as she abstracted the cream-jug from the

breakfast-table, and it was with a sort of triumphant air that she bore the tray to the bedside.

Dicky Johnny insisted on giving her a kiss, and she retired in more subdued fashion than she had come, for she knew his story. Yet for the present the boy's blue eyes were clear and his red lips smiling. The long voyage with its incidents and kindly people had been the most merciful thing possible after his bereavement, and Thomas, who had dreaded meeting a poor little, grief-worn creature at the landing-stage, had been unspeakably relieved, only, however, to be assailed by misgivings as to his ability to make the immediate future entertaining enough for the child. For that the grief was only dormant Thomas could not doubt; a single hour had been long enough for him to discover the intensely affectionate nature under the boyish exterior, and until Dicky Johnny was sound asleep he had feared for a breakdown.

The boy, listening to a description of the flower-nursery, made short work of his feast, and announced his desire to get up.

"Can you put on your clothes by yourself?" asked Thomas.

"Of course! All but some."

"I'll tell Mary to come up and help you."

"No, no," said Dicky Johnny. "You."

Thomas felt pleased. "And what about your bath? Shall I——"

The boy slipped out of bed. "Come on! I'll not splash you, Uncle Tom."

"You had better not!" said Thomas almost gaily, and led the way to the pretty little bathroom which he had added to the cottage.

It was a merry five minutes that followed. But when the small body was wrapped in the big towel,

preparatory to being dried, something seemed to clutch painfully at the man's heart.

"Don't squeeze me so hard," protested Dicky Johnny.

"I beg your pardon," said Thomas awkwardly. "You see I—I'm not used to bathing little boys," he went on with an effort, "though I'm very glad to learn."

"Are you? I don't think you'll take very long to learn, Uncle Tom."

"Thank you. Are you sure you wouldn't rather have Mary?"

"No, no," replied Dicky Johnny, throwing moist arms round the other's neck. "You."

"I—I think I've always wanted to bathe a little boy," said Thomas, with an unsteady smile, "and I'm very glad you're going to stay with me, Dicky Johnny."

"So am I. I'm glad I'm not going to stay with my other uncle—the real uncle—that came to meet me at the steamer."

"I shouldn't say that if I were you. Your Uncle Winston could give you far nicer things than I can. You don't know him, or you might prefer him to me."

Dicky Johnny shook his head. "I don't think I could love him very dearly," he said gravely. "Now I'm dry."

They went back to the bedroom and had great fun. Thomas's mistakes—partly intentional—with regard to the donning of the small garments tickled the boy, whose laughter set the woman downstairs chuckling and murmuring, "'Tis a different house already!" And Thomas, behaving in a perfectly distracted fashion, added absurdity to absurdity, till the little chap fairly reeled with amusement. But at last everything was put on the right way, and they went downstairs,

the boy riding pick-a-back (his own suggestion) to breakfast.

After a cheerful meal Thomas proposed a visit to the flowers.

"Have you got any water-tanks in the glass-houses?" his guest inquired. "And water-hoses?"

"I have. You shall see them also."

"Shall I get playing with them?"

"I dare say that can be arranged," said Thomas, who a couple of hours earlier had definitely made up his mind not to allow any "messaging about" with water. "I am going to give you a little garden of your own, too," he added.

"But I want to help you, Uncle Tom."

"I've no doubt you will, my boy," said Thomas gently. "We'll help each other, eh?"

Dicky Johnny nodded. "Right you are!" he said brightly.

They passed into the sunny garden, the small hand in the big one.

"Which flowers do you like best?" the boy inquired.

"Do you know, I never can be quite sure; I'm fond of so many. Which do you like best, Dicky Johnny?"

Dicky Johnny surveyed the part of the garden visible from where they stood. "Come," he said, "and I'll show you." He led his host to a great bed of pansies.

"Ah," said Thomas, "sometimes I think they are my favourites, too! Take a few if you would like them." He had intended warning his guest against plucking any flower without permission.

"I'll just take one." After some deliberation the boy made his choice. He brought the flower to his host. "Do you know," he said, "that a pansy has three small faces in it?"

"I believe I've heard of such a thing," Thomas returned, smiling. "Yes; I can see them."

"Well, it's just a small family. There's the mother, and there's the daddy, and there's the little one. And they're always together, and——" The pansy fell to the ground.

Thomas saw the change come upon the young face; he saw it quiver as though actually smitten; he saw it whiten with memory and redden with grief. And ere the cry of desolation burst forth he was on his knees beside the child. But Dicky Johnny refused the kindly arms, tore himself from them, and cast himself upon the earth. Oh, agony in a garden! Oh, bleak sorrow under a brilliant sun! Oh, man and child, alike helpless—helpless as flowers before a tempest!

Thomas Nairn, his heart seeming to break, almost as it had broken seven years before, knelt by the small heaving body, a light hand upon it. Perhaps words would have been useless then. Even so, Thomas had none to utter.

Not very long as clock-ticks would have recorded it, but age-long as heart-beats told it, was this storm of childish grief; and it left the boy exhausted. He offered no resistance when Thomas, himself white and shaken, took him in his arms and bore him to the cottage and to his own (Thomas's) bed. The sobs had died to gasping breaths when Thomas, having drawn the green blinds, seated himself by the bedside and tenderly sponged the tear-stained face. That finished, he began to talk softly, soothingly, of the things they would do and see in Alvarley; of the picnics they would go, of the little creatures of wood and moor and stream, also of an occasional trip to the neighbouring town and its shops. He did not cease until he deemed his charge asleep.

But Dicky Johnny was still awake. He stretched out his hand to touch the man's.

"Are you lonesome too?" he whispered.

Thomas drew in his breath. Then he bowed till his black head, streaked with grey, lay on the pillow beside the fair one, and put his arm round the lithe body.

"Not so lonesome as I was, dear little man; not so lonesome," he murmured.

A short pause, and then the faint question. "It is 'cause of me, Uncle Tom?"

"Because of you, Dicky Johnny. It's just as if I had been wanting you always."

"I'm glad it's 'cause of me. This is a nicer bed than mine."

"D'you think so?" Thomas tried to blow his nose and wipe his eyes at the same time.

"Yes. Don't you like having a little boy to sleep with you? I don't kick—much, Uncle Tom."

"You don't care about sleeping alone?"

"Not when I'm lonesome."

"Ah! but you and I are not going to be lonesome any more. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to get you a new little bed for yourself, and I'll put it beside this one, so that you can climb into this one whenever you like. Will that do?"

Dicky Johnny's arms went round his neck.

"I think I love you very dearly," he said.

A little later he fell asleep, for he had not got over the excitements and journeyings of the previous day.

Thomas left him in Mary's care and went out to seek his foreman. Having found him, he took him over to the pansy bed.

"Peter," he said, "I wish you to have them all removed at once. Do what you like with them, but there must be no pansies in the nursery this season."

The man stared at him. "Ye don't mean——" he began.

"By two o'clock," said Thomas, and hurried away

to look out a new length of hose for Dicky Johnny's delectation in the afternoon.

III

But Thomas, with all his big, soft heart, was not a fool; nor was Dicky Johnny, with all his affectionate nature and winsome ways, anything but an ordinary human boy, prone to mischief and capable of rebellion. The twain had loved at first sight, so to speak, but they had still to get to know and understand each other. Not vague but very definite were the responsibilities which the man had put upon his conscience; he had taken charge of the child, body, mind, and soul; he had set himself the task of guiding and protecting Dicky Johnny for many years to come, and of providing, in some measure, for his future. And it was the least he could do, he told himself, in return for the gift of the boy, whose coming had uplifted his whole being, whose presence made his house a home and his garden a nursery indeed. It was not possible that Dicky Johnny should be uninfluenced by the intense love and unwavering care surrounding him; though perhaps their effect was less visible in a decrease of misdeeds than in the penitence, often passionate, which surely followed. Happily, the easy indulgence of his lost parents had not rendered him either greedy or selfish, and he was quick to perceive another's hurt. The not infrequent clashing of will between Thomas and himself involved no ugly wounds.

The summer was a bright and busy one for both. By labouring early and late Thomas contrived to devote himself to Dicky Johnny's health and happiness without neglecting other interests. Moreover, he came out of his hermitage and made friends with the doctor and minister so that the boy might make friends with

their children, and ere long he surprised the villagers, and himself, by undertaking, single-handed, the charge and entertainment of half a dozen boisterous youngsters at picnics and other outings. As for Mary, the housekeeper, she hugged her bulky self and chuckled because of the light that had come into the life of the man whom she had served from boyhood, and praised God because Dicky Johnny graciously allowed her to take her master's place at the bath once a week.

Yes, it was a bright and busy summer at Alvarley—while in their homes or holiday quarters, a couple of hundred miles away, Dicky Johnny's aunts and real uncles concerned themselves with their own affairs; while a bundle of scrip reposed in a City lawyer's safe; while in far North Queensland men toiled in a mine and a manager grew sick of his job. . . .

When autumn came and the rush of outdoor work slackened, Thomas found time to go into his accounts. It was late one night when he struck a balance, and the first thing he did after verifying his figures was to go softly upstairs. As was only to be expected, Dicky Johnny was sleeping soundly; nevertheless, Thomas sighed because he could not share the good news there and then.

In the morning Thomas announced a holiday. They would take train to the nearest town, and——

"And what shall we do there?" inquired Dicky Johnny, who, like other children, preferred definite anticipations to possible surprises.

"You shall buy anything you like, and choose what we shall have for dinner," said Thomas recklessly. "And I want to buy some little books," he added, "because soon I'm going to begin to give you lessons, so that you'll be ready for school next year."

It was a merry day. The only part of it that did not much interest the boy was a visit to the bank, where

Thomas opened an account, in the name of Richard John Temple, with a hundred pounds, the bulk of the season's profits.

"You've brought me luck, Dicky Johnny," he said at dinner. "There is no reason why we should not have a fine florist business before long."

"Yes," said Dicky Johnny, "and you'll help me to sail my new steamer in the big tank, won't you, Uncle Tom?"

"Rather!" assented Thomas, who was in high spirits. "We have good times together, don't we, old man?"

The boy, his mouth being full, nodded emphatically.

"And you don't wish you lived with any other uncle?"

A vigorous shake of the yellow head almost satisfied Thomas.

"And we're going to stick to each other always, eh, Dicky Johnny?" he asked softly.

Dicky Johnny laid down his spoon and shoved his hand into Thomas's.

Which was all that Thomas wanted.

With the exception of one childish ailment, which troubled Thomas far more than the patient, life at the cottage went on smoothly and cheerfully, and the year drew to its close. Christmas, of course, had to be properly celebrated, and Thomas took delight in providing treats for the boy and his young friends.

On Christmas Eve there arrived by post several parcels directed to Master Richard John Temple. They were from aunts and uncles whose names even were not familiar to him; but they contained handsome presents for a little boy to receive. Thomas was surprised, but gratified. He wrote warmly grateful acknowledgments on the boy's behalf and his own. Ere the year ended he got a reply from his cousin

Adela, inviting Dicky to spend a few weeks at her home; she, her husband and her children would be delighted to have the little fellow and would make his stay as happy as possible. Again Thomas was surprised, but now he was more troubled than gratified. The visit might be good for Dicky Johnny; it might mean much happiness. He, Thomas, had no right to refuse it, though the very idea of it hurt him. He told the boy all he knew—which was not a great deal—about Aunt Adela, her home, and her children, being very careful to say nothing that might seem unattractive to the young mind. But Dicky Johnny refused absolutely to visit Aunt Adela or anybody else. Wherefore Thomas, his heart relieved but his mind not altogether easy, sent the nicest answer he could write in the circumstances.

A week later came a note from Winston Temple, mildly remonstrative. Had Thomas considered Richard's interests in giving way to Richard's childish inclinations? It had been exceedingly good of Adela to invite the boy, and he, Winston, was sure the boy would enjoy himself once he were in her home. Adela, he understood, left the invitation open. Would not Thomas reconsider the matter, and write within a week?

Thomas, while resenting this letter, did honestly reconsider the matter, and sought to induce Dicky Johnny to do the same. But now Dicky Johnny became alarmed.

Late one night Thomas found him sobbing.

"What is it, old man, what is it?"

"Oh, Uncle Tom, don't send me away from you; don't let them take me away."

"Not likely!" said Thomas, husky with the lump in his throat.

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Far away in North Queensland men still toiled in a mine, but a manager gave a dinner to an engineer. And not so far away a City lawyer stood at his open safe, holding—nay, clutching—a bundle of scrip. . . .

IV

"Yes," said Winston Temple, stretching his feet to the parlour fire, "it's a weary journey, but I felt a talk with you, Thomas, would be better than much writing. You got my wire, of course."

"Thank you. You might have allowed me to offer you some hospitality. Mary is quite capable, you know."

"I'm sure she is. However, I didn't want to disturb your arrangements more than I could help, so I dined on the express."

"Must you go back to-night?"

"Unfortunately, yes. But I shall sleep on board. Is Richard John gone to bed?"

"Nearly two hours ago."

"I should like to have seen him," said Winston, lighting a cigar, after offering his case to Thomas, who shook his head. "Yes; I should like to have made his better acquaintance. I must hope to do so in the near future, Thomas."

Thomas stooped from his chair and poked the fire which was not requiring attention. Ever since the arrival of the telegram he had been possessed by indefinable forebodings, tormented by the question, "What can Winston want with me that he should take such a journey?"

"We all hope to make his better acquaintance shortly," the smooth voice of the visitor continued. "And we shall not forget how exceedingly good you have been to Richard John."

Methodically Thomas put the poker in its place, and raised himself slowly till his eyes rested on the other's bland countenance. Moistening his lips, he said:

"What exactly are you speaking about, Winston? I think my letters made it quite clear that Dicky Johnny could not pay any visits—in the meantime, at any rate. When he is older, and when I have more leisure, we shall be very glad to take a trip to your city and see you all. It will be only right that he should make the acquaintance of his relatives—as soon as possible. But at present——"

Winston gave his cigar a little wave in the air: "My dear Thomas," he said, "my object in this visit is to induce you to let Richard come to us with the least possible delay—say within a week——"

"That is impossible!"

"Any outfit he requires shall be provided on his arrival. It is not necessary for you to trouble——"

"Stop, if you please!" There was a curious light in the eyes of Thomas. "I am sorry you have taken such a journey on such a mission, Winston, for I must tell you quite frankly that nothing will induce me to let Dicky Johnny go against his desire——"

"He is too young to be allowed to decide such a matter."

"He is old enough to know when he is happy. Besides, he is in my charge."

Winston flicked the ash from his cigar.

"My dear Thomas," he said calmly, "there is really no necessity for either of us to show any heat in this discussion. I have come here as your friend and as the boy's friend also. If you will listen to me for a few minutes——"

"Why do you want the boy now?"

"If you will listen to me, I shall try to explain." Thomas threw himself back in his chair.

"Go on," he said shortly.

"In the first place," began Winston, eyeing the glow of his cigar, "I am ready to admit—we are all ready to admit—that eight months ago we agreed that you should have charge of Richard. But I hope you will be equally ready to admit that such an agreement—such a simply verbal and friendly agreement—need not be continued in the face of—er—altered circumstances." He paused, but his cousin merely tightened his lips.

He proceeded: "In the second place, Thomas, you will admit that we have got to consider the boy's future in a practical fashion; we have no right to let sentiment interfere——"

"I have considered the boy's future in a practical fashion, and shall continue to do so," said Thomas stiffly. "I am not a rich man, Winston, but I have enough for us both. My private income is small, but the nursery has begun to pay. Already I have been able to set aside money for Dicky Johnny; and I may add that when he came to me I increased my life insurance, so that whatever happens to me, he shall be provided for."

"You have been exceedingly generous," murmured Winston. "As I said, we shall not forget——"

"It was the least I could do," Thomas interrupted, "the least I could do—after your giving Dicky Johnny to me."

Winston bowed. "Is it not putting it a little strongly to call it *giving*?" he inquired softly. "But even if you insist on the word, you will not deny the possibility of a—er—gift being made without due reflection and consideration. You remember how hurriedly everything was done, Thomas? Please un-

derstand that we take all responsibility for the error, and that none of us shall ever forget how you——”

“Man,” cried Thomas, “what are you driving at? Do you, or the others, fancy that Dicky Johnny is not safe with me? Have I not shown you that he is provided for sufficiently, if not handsomely? And here he has the best life a child could have. He has his young friends to play with, and Mary is almost a mother to him; his existence is spent among clean and lovely things. And his education is not going to be neglected. I have begun it myself in a small way. Next year he will have lessons with the doctor’s and the minister’s children. The year following——”

“My dear Thomas, I have never doubted your doing your utmost for Richard. At the same time, I must bid you ask yourself whether such an up-bringing is the right one for a boy in Richard’s position?”

Under his cousin’s stare the eyes of the speaker dropped.

“Richard’s position!”

Winston’s smile was bland. “You do not read the papers carefully, so I must explain. Perhaps I ought to have explained at the outset, but I desired to learn how much you knew.” He cleared his throat.

“When my poor brother was lost, he left practically nothing but forty thousand shares in the Hero Copper Mining Company, which——”

“Were not worth the paper they were printed on. I know all about that, Winston. I am quite aware that anything else that the boy’s father left barely covered his liabilities.”

“Yes; as you say, the shares were not worth the paper they were printed on—then; now, however,

they are worth considerably more. The mine has turned out remarkably well—as much as twenty per cent. copper, I've been told. Before Christmas the shares had touched nearly ten shillings; to-day they were done at sixty-five. We are of opinion that they ought to be sold now, and a suggestion has been sent to Kerman, the lawyer, whom my brother had made his executor. No doubt he will agree that it is the right thing to do. He seemed to have private information of the mine, otherwise we should have pressed him to sell before now. But as things have turned out, the delay has been quite advantageous. They will fetch over a hundred thousand pounds. That, Thomas, is Richard's position, to-day. By the time he comes of age——” With a small laugh, Winston threw out his hands.

Thomas was pale. “It is very wonderful,” he said softly, as if to himself. “I must see to it that Dicky Johnny becomes a man capable of bearing such a great responsibility. Very wonderful!” he whispered, and sat gazing at the fire as though he were alone in the room.

Winston frowned in a puzzled manner. It was hardly the reception he had anticipated for his startling news. But possibly his cousin was stunned. “So of course you must see,” he said at last, “that the position, not only of Richard, but of us all, has altered tremendously since that meeting in my house. We must all take our share in fitting Richard for the important future that lies before him. You agree with me, do you not, Thomas?”

Thomas passed his hand across his forehead. Then, suddenly, he seemed to take a grip of himself. He faced his cousin.

“No,” he said firmly, “I do not see that any one's position, save Dicky Johnny's, has changed,”

"You mean," said Winston, "that you do not accept the proposals of the boy's nearest relations?"

"I mean to hold to the agreement which the boy's nearest relations made with me eight months ago."

There was a silence. The faces of both men had hardened, but Winston's was hard to harshness. He spoke first.

"You had better take time to realise the situation. You have nothing to gain by attempting to keep the boy here—have you?"

Thomas flushed. "You have neither right nor reason to make such a suggestion. So far as the boy's fortune is concerned, the sooner you have it placed in charge of the Public Trustee the better I'll be pleased. Dicky Johnny is my care until he comes of age. Man, you drive me to remind you of how easily you all parted with him eight months ago. Do you think I am going to let you have him now?"

All blandness had departed from Winston Temple.

"I'm afraid it is not a matter for you to decide," he began viciously. "There is the law——"

Thomas stiffened. "There is justice, too, I hope. But I'll fight you to my last farthing——"

"It will probably cost you that before you lose."

There was no reply, for fear fell upon Thomas. After all, what claim had he over Dicky Johnny? Even had he a claim, would he be justified in exercising it?

"Yes," said Winston coldly, "you had better take time to think it over—say a week from to-day—though I imagine you will see things in a more reasonable light by to-morrow. I regret that you should not have received my proposal in a more friendly spirit, but I must endeavour to make allowances——"

"Man," cried Thomas, "don't you understand that—that the boy is everything to me?"

The other's face softened slightly. "Well, Thomas, you must not let your heart get the better of your head—for the boy's sake." He rose. "I trust everything may be amicably settled this day week. You can either bring Richard to us, or, if it suits you better, his Aunt Adela will come here for him." He held out his hand. "Let us end this painful interview. I shall sit in the inn until my train is due."

"I cannot ask you to stay, nor can I shake hands with you," said Thomas hoarsely, and turned away to open the door.

Without further words they parted, these two cousins who had never been real friends. But to-night they had got a glimpse of each other's souls, and there was hatred and contempt between them.

Dicky Johnny lay snug in his little bed, cuddling his bear. In the dim illumination of a night-light Thomas gazed upon him.

"My God!" whispered the man. "What am I to do?"

v

And throughout the week that followed he did nothing. Stay, he wrote a letter to an old friend in the City who had always remembered him at Christmas.

Happily spring that year was early, the weather brilliant, and Dicky Johnny could spend most of his waking hours out of doors. Nevertheless, the boy was perplexed.

On the morning of the eighth day he came to Thomas, who was writing a letter. He snuggled against the man's side.

"Uncle Tom, please?"

"Yes, Dicky Johnny?"

"Are you—feeling—lonesome?"

Thomas winced. "What makes you ask that, Dicky Johnny?"

"'Cause I'm feeling—lonesome, too."

Thomas dropped the pen, and took the boy on his knee.

"Don't you think it would be a good plan," he said steadily, "for us to go away in the train to see all your aunts and uncles?"

Dicky Johnny burst into tears. Perhaps he could not have told why he wept. But it had been a perplexing week, and a child's trouble is not necessarily small just because it happens to be vague. He did not know what was wrong. He clung to his protector.

"I would take you safely to them," said Thomas, miserably, "and perhaps later on——"

"No, no; I don't want to go. I want to stay here."

Just then the only mail of the day arrived. Mary entered with the letters, and went out with tears in her eyes because Dicky Johnny had had tears in his.

Thomas made a hasty inspection of the three envelopes. Nothing from Winston! Another day of suspense—another night!

"I don't want to go, Uncle Tom," sobbed the boy.

Thomas held him close. "Dicky Johnny," he whispered, "supposing you and I went away together in a big steamer, not to see anybody, but just to enjoy ourselves—how would that do?"

After a short silence Dicky Johnny mumbled, "You wouldn't ever leave me, would you?"

"No, indeed."

"Then I think I'd like going in the big steamer." Dicky Johnny dried his eyes on Thomas's shoulder. "When shall we go, Uncle Tom?"

"Perhaps quite soon. And neither of us must feel lonesome now, eh?"

"I won't, if you don't," said the boy, "'cause I love you so very dearly. Was you crying too?"

"All right now," said Thomas, setting him down. "Run out to the garden, and I'll be after you as soon as I finish this letter."

"Don't be long," the youngster replied cheerfully, from the door.

It was a wild idea that had come to Thomas. Suerely his heart had got the better of his head. For now he was determined that Dicky Johnny should not be taken from him a day sooner than he could help, and he was prepared to run away with the boy to the uttermost parts of the earth in order that he might possess his treasure a little longer. Nay; he would not surrender his charge until captured, or until his money was all spent. And so he completed his letter to a shipping firm that ran steamers to New Zealand.

But when he went out to the garden, Dicky Johnny caught his hand and begged that they should not go anywhere.

"Why do you want to go away, Uncle Tom, when it's so nice here?"

Poor Thomas had nothing to say. Yet he posted the letter, wondering desperately what he should do if Adela arrived within the next four days. Then he went and told Mary, who broke down completely and so disheartened him that he sent a second letter to the shipping office cancelling the first.

He was powerless, he told himself—utterly powerless.

Three days more went past, without bringing any communication, threatening or otherwise, from Winston. Nor did another letter which Thomas had

expected, or hoped for, come to hand. The man was distracted.

"Dicky Johnny," he said on the evening of the third day, "would you mind if Mary bathed you to-night? I—I don't feel very fit."

"Don't be lonesome again," said Dicky Johnny, kissing him; "it makes me cry inside."

"All right, old man! I'll come up and see you after you're in bed."

"And we don't need to go away anywhere after all?"

"No; we shall stay at home as long as possible. Off you go to Mary."

Left to himself, Thomas went out to the garden, where already the promise of the year was apparent. What promise had it for him? What were a million flowers to the face of a child? The dusk was falling. Thomas felt beaten and utterly broken. In all probability there would be word from Winston in the morning, and Adela would follow. Certainly the parting could not be much longer delayed.

As Thomas strolled towards the gate to the main road, it was opened by a man whom he took to be a gardener coming to tend the firing of the hot-houses. A few seconds later he was holding out his hand and exclaiming in astonishment:

"Why, Gordon, is it really you?"

"Just me," said the other, a little stout man, giving him a hearty grip. "Good of you to recognise me after all those years. I had been away and only got your letter yesterday. I—I thought I had better answer it in person."

"Man, I'm grateful, but what a distance to come!" said Thomas, hurrying his guest to the house. "We'll have supper immediately."

"The fact is," said Gordon nervously, "the thing

was too big to write about. And—I say, look here, Nairn, let me tell you my story before we do anything else.”

“Bad news, I suppose?” murmured Thomas wearily.

“Yes; it’s pretty bad.” Then after a pause, Gordon went on: “Well, as I said, I didn’t get your letter till yesterday. It asked me to see Kerman, the lawyer, and, if possible, find out certain things about your cousin, the late Richard Temple, and the legal position of an orphan——”

“Yes, yes, Gordon; but please tell me——”

“Well, I couldn’t see Kerman, because he has—he has—absconded.”

“Absconded!”

“Appears to have been gambling for years. Lost everything—his own fortune and other people’s. They talk of a million of liabilities and no assets. He had one of the best practices in the City. There was a big story in the papers this morning.” Gordon paused, and looked at his host in amazement. “What’s the matter, Nairn? Pull yourself together, man! Don’t laugh! I just want to say that if you or your friends have been really badly hit by this business, I’m not without a bit to spare. That’s why I came.”

Thomas did not seem to comprehend the words that might have been of such particular moment to himself.

“Has Kerman lost everything?” he gasped, his face working.

“Well, I—I’m afraid so. There’s a rumour that the last of his clients’ securities he got rid of was a big parcel of shares in a copper mine now booming, but he sold at about five shillings.”

Thomas clutched the back of a chair, wavering. “Oh, God bless him!” he whispered; then with a

sudden mental vision of the fugitive wretch, "God help him!"

Gordon sprang up to catch and support the swaying figure. But at that moment the door opened, and in ran a little rosy boy in pyjamas.

"Did you forget to come up?" cried Dicky Johnny, ignoring the stranger.

Thomas steadied himself and caught up the child, holding him close.

"Shake hands with our good friend, Mr. Gordon," he said. "He's not an uncle."

The boy put out his hand readily.

"And who are you?" asked Mr. Gordon pleasantly.

A wondrous sweet smile illuminated the countenance of Thomas as he carried the boy to the door.

"He is my—son!"

XII

SILK STOCKINGS AND SUEDES

I

THE young girl stood in the unkindly glare of the two incandescents with which the ugly five-branched gasolier was fitted. Saving herself and the lights there was nothing in the room suggestive of freshness or modernity. Austerity, solidity, stolidity were everywhere, on the walls, in the furnishings, in the other occupants. The parlour was old-fashioned without any of the charm sometimes pertaining to such an apartment; it had an air of harsh respectability; a big fire might make it uncomfortably warm, but never cosy.

The fingers of the young girl were knit in front of her slim body, against the plain navy blue frock. Her dark eyes moved eagerly, anxiously, between the man and woman who occupied the hair-cloth arm-chairs on either side of the hearth, the uncle and aunt who had given her a home three years ago. Clearly she was awaiting their verdict on a matter of no little importance to herself.

A glance at the countenances of Mr. and Mrs. Brash would have satisfied you that they were honest people; which is not to say that the countenances were bright and open; rather were they inclined to dulness and aloofness. They suggested a puritanism capable of enduring all manner of suffering for conscience's sake—and, perhaps, of inflicting it too; for

it is difficult to be quite so righteous as were the Brashes, without being a little self-righteous also.

Mr. Brash completed his perusal of the list of local subscriptions to the Puntas Arenas Mission in which he was deeply and practically interested, closed the pamphlet, laid it upon his knees, and took up the envelope which his wife had silently laid on the table at his elbow, five minutes previously. The envelope had been opened, apparently in haste.

As he withdrew its contents, a card partly printed and partly written on, the young girl quivered, and her white teeth closed on her scarlet under lip. A frown appeared on Mr. Brash's shaven face.

Just then the door was opened and a man, heavily built, hairy and grizzled, and rather shabbily clad, entered. With a glance round the room he crossed to the window and seated himself on the hair-cloth sofa, picking up, as he did so, the morning's paper. No one in the room paid the slightest attention to the new arrival, who forthwith became immersed in the shipping news.

Mr. Brash's frown deepened. His keen grey eyes turned to the girl.

"Surely you do not expect your aunt and me to grant permission for you to attend this gathering, Hilda," he said.

Hilda's face relaxed for a moment as if she would speak. Then her lips met in a straight line.

"I have already told Hilda," said Mrs. Brash, without pausing in her crocheting, "that we do not approve of dancing-parties; but she insisted on having your opinion."

"It is out of the question," he said, not harshly but very firmly. "No doubt your friends the Bensons mean kindly, but it would please me more were you

to associate with less light-minded girls—the Smalls, for example.”

“The Smalls are awful stodges,” said Hilda involuntarily. “At least”—quickly—“I don’t get on with them. And Kitty Benson——”

“That is not the way to talk of the Smalls,” Mrs. Brash interrupted. “Their father and mother——”

“Darned old hypocrites!” came in a grunting voice from the man behind the newspaper.

“William!” said Mrs. Brash, “shall I leave the room, or will you?”

“Sorry,” said the grunting voice. “I’ll dry up. But the bare mention o’ them Smalls always makes me sick.”

“Be good enough to hold your tongue, sir,” said Mr. Brash. He returned the card to the envelope, which he replaced on the table.

“Uncle Robert,” cried Hilda; “why won’t you let me go? I’m nearly fifteen, and it’s for Christmas Eve, and it’s my first dance——”

“My dear child, you must allow me to judge for you in this matter. I am willing to allow for disappointment on your part, though I must say I had hoped that by this time your aunt’s views and my own on such amusements as dancing and theatre-going would have been clear to you.”

“But what harm——”

“You are too young to demand explanations, but you are old enough to obey those in whose charge you are.”

There was a short silence.

“My white frock would do, though it’s miles too short,” pleaded the girl. “Oh, Aunt Frances, couldn’t you——”

“You have heard what your uncle has said, my

dear," replied the lady stiffly. "Besides, what would you do at a dancing-party when you cannot dance?"

"Can't dance! Why, Aunt Frances, I can dance like—like anything! I had heaps of dancing-lessons when I was a little thing, and father and mother——" She stopped short. In a vague way she had ere now gathered that many things in her parents' lives had not been "approved of" by her aunt and uncle. But though she had suffered veiled hints, she had never been straightly informed that her mother, her aunt's sister, had been "flighty and extravagant," whilst her father had quitted the world without leaving anything to his credit—as we understand the phrase in these practical days. "Aunt Frances, didn't you dance when you were a girl?" The question was entreating.

The woman flushed. "I had no one to show me the sin of it, as you have," she replied.

"But—but you haven't shown me the sin of it." Hilda looked from one to the other.

"That will do, Hilda—that will do," said Mr. Brash, his voice harder.

"It isn't fair," she cried, near to tears. "All the girls at school are allowed to dance—except those Smalls—fat-legged . . . pasty-faced . . . goody-goody things!"

A "hear, hear!" came from behind the newspaper.

"Leave the room; go to bed, Hilda," said Mrs. Brash wrathfully. "And pray to God to pardon you that rebellious and pleasure-loving spirit."

"I'll go to bed," the girl returned passionately, "but I don't believe God is so—so hard as you make Him out to be!" Her eyes filled, she choked, and fled.

With something approaching horror Mr. and Mrs. Brash regarded each other.

"I don't know what she is coming to," the latter said at last.

"She's coming to what you're driving her to," said the man on the sofa, throwing aside his paper.

"You have not been asked to speak, William," said Mr. Brash, scowling at his brother.

"True. I'd be a dummy if I waited for invitations in this happy home. I'm not given to interferin' in your arrangements, as you well know, Robert, but on this occasion I must cough it up, or bust. Let Hilda go to her dancin'-party. It's natural for a maid to want to kick her heels——"

"Do you wish me to leave the room, William?" Mrs. Brash frigidly inquired.

"Not at all. I want you to back me up against Robert. Let Hilda say she's sorry for her tantrum—though 'twas only natural—and then tell her she can go to the party. She's growin' up. She'll soon be a woman. Why do her out o' sweet and youthful pleasures? She's not the sort to enjoy the Smalls' kind o' party, wi' its tiddley-winks and Simon-says-thumbs-up muck!—I tell you, she's not. And she'll eat her young heart out if you keep on rubbin' in the holiness as you've been doin'. There, I've said my say, Robert, and I don't believe I've said so much in five years. Let her go."

It was nearly a minute ere Mr. and Mrs. Brash found their voices. William's temerity had fairly taken away their breaths. For what right had William to offer an opinion, even with all humility and diffidence? William's history may here be given in a few words. Robert's senior by a couple of years, he had been the black sheep of Robert's family. His early manhood had been spent at sea, but an accident

to his left arm, by rendering it almost powerless, had sent him ashore to waste several years in more or less riotous living. Eventually Robert, who had prospered, started him in a small business. He failed. Robert started him again, and again he failed. He was not a toper, but he would have his bouts. While his manners were kindly, his speech was, to put it mildly, careless. Robert decided that he was hopeless for business, and he readily agreed. He was fit only for the sea-life. Robert secured him a light job (at a light salary) in a warehouse at the docks. And on the third night he went on the spree with some old shipmates. Robert hardened his heart and closed his purse. He allotted the erring one an attic-room in his house and made him do the lighter work of the garden. He allowed him one shilling per week, deeming that he could not go far wrong on that. William preferred tobacco to drink, so he kept sober and performed his duties fairly well. Unfortunately, with all his patience and justice, Robert could not help adopting, along with his wife, a superior and contemptuous attitude towards his brother, which went far to killing the latter's sense of gratitude. William was never permitted to forget that he was a pauper dependent on the bounty of his brother and sister-in-law, or that he was a creature lacking alike in religion and respectability. So it had been for seven years.

"You forget yourself, William," said Mr. Brash at last, freezing.

"Maybe, Robert, I do. The little maid moved me. I thought the days for a petticoat to move me were over. Sit still, Mrs. Brash. I didn't mean a flannel one." William smiled. "Come now, forgive my roughness—impudence, if you like—but let Hilda go to the party and dance her pretty feet sore."

"Pah!" muttered Mr. Brash, and picked up the pamphlet which had fallen on the rug.

Mrs. Brash resumed her crocheting.

A couple of minutes passed.

"Robert," said William softly, "you're entitled to treat me like dirt, but you're foolish to treat Hilda as if she was clay. Don't think you can mould her just as you please, or you'll make a mess of the job. I know her better than you do. She wants to love you, but now you won't let her; your godliness freezes her. Don't break her young spirit. Poor little maid, d'you think you'll ever get her to believe that all folks who dance are bound for Below? Darn it, you don't believe that yourself!"

"Silence, William!"

But William was not to be suppressed. "I haven't asked you for anything for seven years, Robert. No doubt, I've had no right to ask for anything after all I owe you. Still, the fact remains that I haven't asked. Now I'm asking. Let Hilda feel you're human, after all, by lettin' her go to the dancin'-party." He paused and sighed.

Mrs. Brash gave him a quick, cold glance, but her husband's eyes remained on the page.

"You're hard," said the grizzled man at last, "very, very hard, and you're drivin' me to this. *Look!*"

So sudden, so peremptory was the command, that the husband and wife incontinently obeyed.

William had got up and from his waistcoat pocket drawn a piece of paper. He unfolded it and held up between his broad finger and thumb a shining sovereign.

"Where did you get that?" Mr. Brash's question was involuntary. He stared at the coin.

"The savin's o' two years," said William quietly.

"I was goin' to try to save another and then leave you for a week just to see if the sea was still blue. But maybe I can put this pretty quid to a better use." He cleared his throat, and continued. "Since I came to this little town, seven years ago, I've behaved myself pretty well. I've done nothin' to disgrace you, Robert, except be your brother and not go to church. But now I feel like goin' on the razzle-dazzle—skite—spree—or whatever you prefer to call it." He glanced at the clock. "Still two and a half hours till the pubs close—plenty o' time for me to paint this little place magenta. I'll guarantee to get blind, miraculous and roarin', also to get run in and have my name in the paper to-morrow. Care for the advertisement, Robert?"

"If you dare," began Mr. Brash, whilst his wife gave a gasp of horrified disgust, and cried, "You shall never enter this house again."

William looked sadly from one to the other. "I'm afraid you would never be happy so long as you knew I had such a fortune in my pocket. Well, would you like me to drop it into the mission-box on the mantel-piece?"

They stared at him as he walked to the door, and halted with his fingers on the handle.

Slowly and distinctly he said: "Let Hilda go to the party, and my fortune goes to the mission. Otherwise—— Well, I'll give you five minutes to think it over. I'll go out and have a smoke" (smoking was not permitted in the house), "but make up your minds for the little maid's sake."

And he left the room.

Let no one sneer at the Brashes. Respectability like theirs knows no dread like the dread of scandal.

On his return to the parlour, William found his brother alone.

"Well, Robert?"

"I have never known you tell a lie," said Robert bitterly, "and I presume you are capable of carrying out your unseemly threat."

William nodded, but said nothing.

The other coughed once or twice. "Hilda may go to the dance on condition that she leaves at nine-thirty."

"No conditions, Robert—no conditions, please," said William gently. "It'll be just as big a sin to dance till nine-thirty as till eleven." He brought out the sovereign, stepped to the mantelpiece and held it over the black box. "Hilda goes to the dance without anything bein' said or done to spoil her pleasure in it—is that so, Robert?"

Presently the gold chinked upon silver and copper. William glanced at his brother's averted face and passed to the door.

"I'm goin' upstairs, so I'll tell Hilda she has your permission. The rest's our secret, I hope, Robert. I—I'd be mighty glad if I could do something to please you after this."

He ascended rather heavily, not so much delighted with himself or his victory after all. He tapped on the girl's door. She had not yet undressed, and she came promptly.

"You're to get to your dancin'-party, Honey," he said. "Be good to your aunt and uncle."

Her arms flew round his neck. "Dear, dear Uncle Bill!"

Well, perhaps that was his reward.

II

Not in law alone may we win our case without gaining full satisfaction. Hilda had no sooner dispatched a painfully neatly written response to the invitation than she began to worry about her raiment for the great occasion. Mrs. Brash (who had accepted the situation neither heartily nor resentfully, but as one who simply keeps a bargain) was quite unmoved by the sighs over the length of the white frock.

"It is quite long enough for your age," she said at last.

"But I'm too long for my age," returned Hilda, who was certainly a tall girl. "Couldn't it be let down just one inch?" She had dreamed one night of a new long dress in apple-green silk, but about four a.m. the dream had turned into a nightmare, wherein she had seen herself condemned to play "consequences" with the Smalls for ten thousand years, garbed in a "fish-wife" costume which she had worn at the age of seven. "Just one inch, Aunt Frances."

"You are an exceedingly vain girl," was the reply. "I cannot have it altered. But I had better buy you a new pair of stockings."

With a very little encouragement Hilda would have fallen on her neck.

"And gloves," said Mrs. Brash.

"Oh!" cried the girl, her arms ready.

"I'll see about them this afternoon." And Mrs. Brash hurried away.

Afternoon school that day did not add much to Hilda's education. Visions, distracting yet delicious, of black silk (would they be transparent?) and white suède (how many buttons?) floated between her eyes and the blackboard, her books, her very teachers. She

just escaped being "kept in" for gross inattention and carelessness.

She arrived home before her aunt, though she had discussed dress with friends on the way, and it was a long, long hour until Mrs. Brash appeared.

"You may put them in your drawer until required, Hilda. They are your Christmas gift from me," she said, and went out again to a Zenana tea-meeting ere the trembling girl could thank her.

Up to her room flew Hilda, and tore open the flimsy parcel.

Why didn't the heavens, or at least the ceiling, fall when these bitter moans issued from the quivering scarlet lips of this young creature?

"Cashmere! . . . Cotton!"

She cast them from her, and threw herself on the bed, hands clenched, eyes streaming.

Two hours later she managed to say to her aunt: "They are very nice; thank you so much." If Hilda's insincerity be unpardonable, then are we all condemned.

Despair was upon her. She could not go to the Benson party, where every girl would be wearing silk stockings and suède (or, at worst, silk) gloves. Cashmere and cotton—ugh! they were impossible, especially with her terribly short skirt and plain slippers. And yet to give up the dance!—the dance on Christmas Eve, with its professional musicians, its grown-up programmes, its conservatory hung with Chinese lanterns, its nice boys who could dance properly, some of them in real dress-suits! . . .

That was a bad night for Hilda, in more senses than one. Age, toasting its toes at the last of the evening fire, is apt to assume that healthy Youth has no worries after ten p.m. Age, with all its experience and wisdom, its sense of justice and propriety, its

care and anxiety, ay, and its love, may sit there in communion with Heaven, while through a wall, or up a stair, Youth, for lack of a thought of understanding sympathy, writhes in a little hell and perchance makes a little deal with the devil. Mrs. Brash had not sought to save money that afternoon; she had sought to discourage vanity. And she had succeeded in wounding a child's natural and proper pride to desperation point. For, after all, what we call woman's vanity is not so seldom just her sense of the fitness of things. Mrs. Brash herself owned specially fine boots and gloves for Sundays, and it may not be presumed that either vanity or superstition made her put them on, or that she knew not the parable of the wedding garment. It is hard to be good, but it is not necessarily good to be hard.

When Hilda had turned her damp pillow for the tenth time she lay still, and her wits went to work.

III

The young man at the counter deftly tied the parcel and scribbled the bill.

Hilda who had been going pink and white for the past five minutes, opened her purse.

"Oh, dear!" she murmured, and again "oh, dear!" She felt that her confusion was very badly done.

The young man thought it very pretty. Also, he knew who Hilda was, and he said pleasantly: "It will be all right, miss. Any time you're passing will do nicely."

"I—I'm so sorry," she stammered, now pale, "I've only a shilling with me. But please take it."

"Oh, it isn't worth while. You can settle the account another time."

But she put the shilling on the counter, and, taking her purchase, hastened, with burning cheeks, from the shop. The young man's "good afternoon" fell on deaf ears.

How glad she was that it was raining heavily, so that she had her waterproof to conceal the parcel—so that few people were abroad. Presently her nervousness gave place to a certain reckless excitement. She could almost have skipped along the wet pavement. How clever she had been! How happy she felt! Something was sure to happen so that she would be able to put everything all right. Oh, yes, something was sure to happen—especially at Christmas time. And how she was going to enjoy the dance! Only a week now till the glorious evening!

It was not until bed-time that she ventured to unwrap her purchases—and oh, rapture!—to try them on. There was an old-fashioned long cheval mirror in her room—a vain thing surely, in the house of Brash!

She stood before it in her simple white petticoat, her slender shapely limbs clad in the coveted black silk. She admired them; she moved them in little stealthy dancing-steps; she admired them again. . . . Very carefully she tried on the gloves—oh, so long, so crumpley, such beauties! *Now* it didn't really matter if her frock was a little wee bit short, if her slippers were quite plain. She wished she had them also to put on then and there—her corals, too—but they were in a wardrobe that made noises when you opened it. However, she had plenty to admire, plenty to dream about before the mirror, and though the room began to feel chilly, she lingered, dusky hair loose, cheeks flushed, eyes sparkling, mouth smiling—

as pretty a creature as ever thrilled with innocent desire of innocent pleasure.

Ah! All at once the light went out, for it was Mr. Brash's custom to shut off the gas at 10.30.

Up in the attic, William, who had been browsing on a sensational novelette, borrowed from the gardener, muttered "Darn it," and composed himself for slumber. But it was long ere sleep came to Hilda. For with the going out of the light her jubilation had departed.

With her finery under her pillow, and her head under the sheet, she lay awake, a victim of guilt and dread. She owed the draper eight shillings, and she had not a penny in the world, nor any prospects of receiving even that modest sum. The Brashes did not believe in young people having money. Every Saturday morning Hilda was given a sixpence, but in the evening, after prayers, it went into the mission-box. The shilling she had paid on account of her debt had been a present from Uncle Bill on her last birthday. She had been so unused to spending money that it had lain in her purse for months.

The hopefulness of day became the hopelessness of night. Eight shillings! What was she to do? The sum danced and writhed before her in a figure of fire. What would happen when the account came, as it surely would, before long? What would her aunt and uncle say? All the wisdom in the world cannot return satisfactory answers to such questions, but Hilda wrestled with them as the hours dragged past. She thought of taking the goods back to the shop, with the explanation once used by a lady in her hearing to the effect that they were not at all what she had expected; but she realised that she could not face the young man again. She decided not to go to the dance, and in the next breath prayed to Heaven for

the sum of eight shillings. She continued to repeat the petition until an answer came in the shape of sleep.

As the days passed she lost colour. William was the first to notice this. She came to him one afternoon when the others were out and begged him to take charge of a parcel for her until she asked for it. The parcel was tied with string, worsted and thread. He agreed without questionings, but remarked on her pale cheeks. She said she was all right, and ran away. He did not pursue. He was as used to "the ways o' petticoats" as he was convinced of the futility of trying to understand them. "'Tis maybe the excitement, poor little maid," he reflected, as he locked the parcel in the drawer where he kept tattered novelettes and old pipes. But he mentioned the paleness to Robert, who reported it to his wife.

"The holidays have upset her," was Mrs. Brash's verdict, and at bed-time she presented her niece with a cup of a peculiarly repulsive, old-fashioned physic. Hilda took it in the hope that it might be part of her penance.

The twenty-fourth of December came at last, yet too soon. She was a creature of apprehensions till the afternoon, when sheer excitement took possession of her. She relinquished her secret prayers for the sum of eight shillings. A girlish equivalent of "Eat, drink and be merry" would have expressed her then.

The dance was at seven, and she went up to dress, declaring that she didn't want any tea, at four. Uncle Bill never took afternoon tea, so she was able to secure her parcel from his keeping.

About six o'clock her aunt came to her room with a glass of milk. Perhaps the woman's eyes softened a

little at the sight of such sweet, fresh, restless beauty, but her lips kept firm.

"Your frock is quite long enough," she remarked as she fastened it behind.

"Oh, yes, Aunt Frances."

"Your left stocking is twisted."

"Oh! I—I'll put it right." Hot all over, Hilda adjusted the cashmere which concealed the silk.

"Have you tried your gloves on?"

"Yes—yes, thank you. They're all right. Everything's all right," the girl said hurriedly, with a curious hatred of herself.

"I do not care for the way you have arranged your hair," Mrs. Brash said. "If you would learn to wear it the way Martha Small wears hers—but never mind now."

At any other time Hilda would probably have retorted that Martha Small, being the possessor of about three hairs, could not wear them any other way, even if she stood on her head; but now she only inquired humbly whether she might don her corals. Mrs. Brash, who did not object to corals and jet, gave the required permission.

"It is a fine clear night, so you do not need a cab going," she said. "Your Uncle William shall see you to the door. Now drink your milk and come downstairs when you are ready. I must see that your Uncle Robert gets his dinner properly."

Hilda, though fully prepared, delayed her descent until the last minute, cloaked and clutching the velvet bag containing her slippers and gloves (suèdes). She was feeling reckless and elated again. Uncle Bill was waiting for her in the hall, and as she reached his side her aunt came out of the dining-room. There were some awkward moments until William opened the door. He and the girl were at the bottom of the

steps when Mrs. Brash did an odd and perhaps rather a difficult thing.

She said slowly and distinctly: "Your Uncle Robert and I hope you will enjoy yourself to-night"—and shut the door.

"That's better!" muttered Uncle Bill, with a laugh.

"Oh!" murmured Hilda, without a laugh.

Beyond the garden the road was dark.

"Honey," said William, in sudden consternation, "what's the matter?"

With a sob, Hilda caught his arm.

"Tell me," he said, with exceeding gentleness.

At last, somehow, she managed to tell him. "And oh, Uncle Bill, what am I to do?" she ended.

He did not answer her all at once, and before he did so he drew her hand close to his side.

"What are you to do, Honey? Why, you're to enjoy your dancin'-party and your silk stockin's and your—your pretty gloves! They're as good as paid for; because, you see, I've been wonderin' what I could give you for your Christmas present, and now I'll just give you the price of your fal-lals, and the fal-lals'll be my present to you, and I'll explain to the folks at home. And now you're not to weep a tear, Honey, nor say a single word. But if you like to give me a kiss when I give you the pennies to-morrow—well, I'll not say no. For it was a shame that you shouldn't have silks and so on, if your heart was set on them; but now you've got them for your very own—and that's the end of the story. Aren't we lucky to get such a fine night, too? And don't you hurry away if they keep up the fun. I'll see that the cab waits for you."

She could do nothing but squeeze his arm till they came to their destination. And when the door of

Delight had closed behind her, William strolled homewards, his hand in his pocket fingering his total assets—fourpence.

IV

Mr. and Mrs. Brash retired to their chamber at the usual hour, though Mrs. Brash intended to come downstairs to greet Hilda on her return. For the first time in many years the gas was not shut off at ten-thirty. About that hour, however, Mr. Brash, who feared that he would not be able to sleep, came down to the parlour for a book. He had not troubled to put on his slippers. As he crossed the hall a slight rattling noise struck upon his ear. It was followed by the unmistakable chink of cash. The sounds came from the parlour, the door of which was open an inch or so. Mr. Brash came to a standstill, but the next moment he heard a cough which he recognised as his brother's. He went silently to the door and peeped through the narrow opening.

William was sitting at the table with a knife in one hand and the mission-box in the other. On the cloth lay a few pieces of silver and some coppers. William, who was perspiring, inserted the blade in the slot of the box and cautiously manipulated the former. At the end of a minute a coin slipped out. It was a half-penny.

"Darn it!" grunted William, "'tis one o' my own."

He was luckier next time, for a half-crown flopped on the table.

"Thank God!" said William devoutly, if not piously. "Old Small's! He put it in last Saturday night, takin' care to let us see it first. Now how much have I got?" Adding fourpence from his pocket to the little cluster, he reckoned it up. "Seven-and-six and a ha'penny—darn it! All right, little

maid, your fal-lals'll soon be paid for. Here's luck!" And in went the knife.

Out came a shilling.

"Good!" said William, and he proceeded to return sixpence-ha'penny to the box.

Robert, very pale, entered.

"William, what is this? What are you doing?" he said hoarsely.

The grizzled man was taken aback, but quickly recovered himself. He looked his brother straight in the eyes.

"I was borrowing eight shillings, to be paid back by a shilling a week," he said quietly. "You don't suppose I would steal, Robert?"

Mr. Brash leant against the mahogany sideboard and put his hand to his head.

"You don't suppose I would *steal*, Robert?" William repeated. "My sins are many, as you know, but you're not to include stealin'. Don't you hear me, Robert?"

Robert wet his lips. "Why," he said, with an effort—"why do you wish to borrow the money? Could you not have trusted me so far as to ask me for it?"

"Could you have trusted me so far as to lend it?" William spoke softly.

After a pause—"For what do you want the money?" said Robert, in a voice that was new to his brother. For it held no superiority, no hardness nor bitterness, no contempt; only a half-stifled agony of appeal, the utterance of a man who feels a poignancy he cannot name or even understand. William was not to know how his brother's mind had been troubled since that night, a fortnight ago, when his sovereign had gone into the box, but instinctively he felt that a crisis had come.

"I'll tell you all about it," he said abruptly. "Yes—if you'll sit down, Robert, and promise not to think ill of the little maid—I'll tell you."

"What has Hilda to do with it?" Robert asked, though somehow he had thought of Hilda the instant he looked upon the scene at the table.

"Hilda has more to do wi' things than we thought. She still belongs to you—to us—but 'tis easy to lose her. Robert, I can't tell you, if you don't sit down."

Robert hesitated, then took the nearest chair. "Go on," he whispered.

He did not interrupt while William told the brief story; and when it was ended he made no comment. After a long silence he said, "It's time you were going to fetch her home," and got up to leave the room.

"You'll not be hard on her, Robert?" said William. "She's had a bad week—a cruel bad week. Can't you believe that?" He was about to plead further, but he caught a glimpse of the other's face, and lo! it was enough. He nodded to the departing Robert, and returned the money to the box. Thereafter, with a new warmth in his heart, he set out to meet Hilda.

It was Uncle Bill who was silent on the drive home, for the girl was athrill with the delights of the evening, and conscience was still stunned and inert. But at last he got saying that which was on his soul to say.

"Honey," he whispered, "do you trust me? . . . You do? Sure? Then slip off your outside stockin's and put on your best gloves. Quick! Your Uncle Robert knows all about it—don't be frightened—he's not angry wi' you—somehow I think he's sort o' angry wi' himself—but everything's all right at home—only I think 'twould hurt him sore if you tried to

deceive him to his very face. Honey, to please your old Uncle Bill, do what I ask you. I know 'tis cruel to startle you so, but you'll be a happy girl in five minutes. Darn it!—I believe we're all goin' to be happy! There now, don't worry yourself; just do it, Honey."

Hilda had great faith in Uncle Bill, but dismay overwhelmed her. Nevertheless she acceded to his request without waiting for answers to her questions. But she had still one cashmere stocking on when the cab drew up at the house.

Mr. Brash opened the door.

"I hope you have had a pleasant time, Hilda," he said, as if repeating a lesson. Then as she halted, trembling and fearful, before him, he added, "We must try to—to understand each other better, Hilda. Now go to your aunt, my dear." Bending stiffly, perhaps timidly, he touched his lips to her forehead.

Hilda, silk stockings and suède gloves forgotten, ran upstairs.

"Yes," said Mr. Brash, as though speaking to himself, "we must try to understand each other better." He laid his hand on his brother's arm just as he might have done thirty years before.

XIII

THE GNOME

HILARY, being deeply conscientious, as most little girls are, tried very hard to feel sorry that her Aunt Rachel had got such a bad headache; but, all the same, she enjoyed having lunch by herself in the big, old-fashioned dining-room, and noticed that the maid, who brought her the delicious cold chicken and an unusually large supply of strawberries, seemed to be enjoying herself too.

And afterwards, sitting in the garden with her doll, Hilary found it quite impossible to be truly miserable, and soon gave up stealing pitying glances at the blinded window of her aunt's bedroom. It is difficult to be unhappy in a lovely garden, especially if you are young, as Hilary was, and believe, as Hilary did, that the flowers and birds, and butterflies and bees, and even the wasps, are all there to be happy and to wish you happiness. Hilary would have liked her father and mother to have been there also, but that morning she had had letters from them, written on board the yacht, and so they did not seem so very far away after all. Besides, the letters had told her that her mother was ever so much better, which was the gladdest thing in the world to think of just then.

Somehow Hilary did not feel lonely in the garden with no one except her doll to talk to. The day before she had felt very lonely, although her aunt had been with her; but now and then grown-ups have a way of

making little people feel more solitary than solitude itself can do.

Aunt Rachel, who seemed quite old, never meant to be unkind, but she always meant to be practical and precise and proper, which at times is almost as trying as being positively disagreeable. Perhaps she hurt Hilary most by her cold unbelief in Fairies.

She shocked the little girl by bluntly expressing the awful opinion that Fairies were all "stuff and nonsense."

Not that Hilary's belief was likely to be shaken. Her parents believed in Fairies, else why had they so often told her about them? Her favourite books, moreover, which she could almost read, especially the passages she knew by heart, also told of Fairies in a manner that carried conviction. No; it was vain for Aunt Rachel to deny the existence of Fairies and call them nasty names; but it was horrid of her to say that Hilary was too old to believe in them.

Hilary, during her stay with her aunt in the beautiful country, had often wished she could find a Fairy somewhere, just to show her aunt how wrong were her ideas. Hilary did not greatly care what sort of Fairy, although she would prefer a "good" one, in shimmering cobwebby robes, with a star-tipped magic wand in her hand. She did not deem that any Fairies could be positively bad. Even the Wicked Fairy in the "Sleeping Beauty" had had much reason for being annoyed.

On this particular afternoon, in the sunny garden, Hilary told her doll a fairy-tale that her aunt had once called "quite absurd." She had just come to the beginning of the happy ending, when one of her aunt's maids appeared on the scene.

"Miss Wallis sent me to tell you, Miss Hilary, that she thinks it is too hot for you to go for a walk

this afternoon," said the maid, "and she wants you to be sure to stay in the garden, but not to make a noise, because her head aches."

"All right, Kitty," the little girl returned. "I shan't make a noise."

"I'm cleaning the silver to-day, or I would stop and play with you, Miss Hilary."

"I could help you!" said Hilary eagerly.

"I'm afraid Miss Wallis wouldn't like that. Shall I get you a book—your nice fairy-tale one?"

"No, thank you, Kitty. I'd rather just think about Fairies now," Hilary replied soberly.

"Well, I'm sure you are a queer child!" said Kitty, turning away reluctantly, for she was young, and enjoyed a game with the little girl.

When she had gone, Hilary got up and began to walk about the garden, her doll having fallen asleep in her arms.

It was a large garden, and Hilary had not yet explored all the paths. She thought it would be great fun to get lost in the garden, chiefly because she would be quite sure to be found by tea-time. Then she wondered if there were any Fairies anywhere in the garden. Of course she did not expect to see them by daylight. She wondered for a long time, but came to the melancholy conclusion that probably Fairies would not be seen in the garden of a person who did not believe in them. At the same moment she came to a little gateway in a high hedge.

Hilary had not previously observed this gateway, and the gate looked as if it had not been used for a long time. But she managed to open it, although the handle scared her with the screech it made.

She found herself standing on the verge of a wood. Claspings her doll a little tighter, she lingered, gazing. A narrow footpath, thick with pine-needles, led from

her very feet away among the trees; her eyes could follow its course for some distance amid the dim shades and bright splashes of sunlight. Afar off it seemed to take a sharp bend, and she wondered what might be round the corner. She had never been so near to a wood, but some of her favourite stories were about woods—and likewise Fairies and Elves, and Brownies and Gnomes. Already she began to people this wood with sprites of her imagining. A cuckoo called—it was like a sweet summons; the pretty path, too, invited her tread.

She took one step forward, and halted, holding her doll still closer—not afraid, but rather excited. Besides, she remembered her aunt. Would her aunt be angry?

The cuckoo called again.

Aunt Rachel had said she was to stay in the garden. Still, perhaps, the wood was part of the garden. She took another step forward, then looked back. She could see nothing of the house except its chimneys above the shrubbery. Aunt Rachel had never said she must not go into the wood; and Aunt Rachel had told her so many, oh! so many, things she must not do! Surely Aunt Rachel would have mentioned the wood, had it been a forbidden place!

Once more the cuckoo called.

This time Hilary took several steps forward, and immediately the bird repeated its notes.

Hilary hesitated no longer. If afterward she should feel guilty, she could confess to her father and mother, who understood things better than any one else. She would not tell her aunt at all. And she would only go as far as the corner, and then return to the garden.

She passed into the wood, glancing from side to side, upwards and downwards, stepping lightly, as

though she sought to avoid disturbing a sleeping Elf. At times she could see large spaces of blue sky, at others the merest traces. Now and then she looked behind, and was not sorry to discern the old gate, for the adventure was making her young heart beat faster, her breath come quicker.

How still it was! There was no sound at all. Even the cuckoo had fallen silent. Perhaps the cuckoo, she thought, was now satisfied because she had entered the wood—there was no need for him to call longer. She had never seen a cuckoo; she would like very much to spy one. Perhaps——

Hilary looked behind her once more; but this time the garden-gate was not to be seen. Evidently she had turned the corner without noticing that it was a corner. She stopped with the intention of going back, but in the same moment, a patch of green, not very far ahead, attracted her. It was a bright patch, so vivid, indeed, that it seemed to be set in darkness, so lovely that Hilary thought of dancing Fairies—in the moonlight, of course. Could it be that she would find a Fairy-ring there?

She went towards it slowly, yet eagerly. Unconsciously she began to step on tiptoe, holding her breath. By this time her mind was all in Fairyland.

On the edge of the bright patch stood a great tree. Hilary drew level with it, then halted with a gasp.

There was something—some one—lying on the grass, almost at her feet. In some ways it was like a man, thought Hilary, but so short and squat. It was lying with its hands supporting its chin, peering into a dusky hollow of the wood. It was clothed in a rather unpleasing shade of brown; its cap, of a shape unfamiliar to Hilary's eyes, and its soft shirt-collar were brown also. It had thick black hair; and its face, which looked old and wizened, was dark-hued

and ugly—big nose, big ears, big mouth, big teeth. She could not see its eyes.

Fascinated, Hilary gazed at the recumbent figure. She wanted to run away, but could not. And all at once a wondrous idea made her heart leap.

"Oh!" she exclaimed involuntarily.

"Tut! Now you've frightened it," said the strange being, without turning its head.

"Oh!" cried Hilary again, and dropped her doll.

"Oh!" she said a third time.

"Never mind. Perhaps it will come back again. Keep still, if you want to see it."

The being spoke ordinary language, but, Hilary noticed, in a queer croaking voice.

She did not know what it was talking about, but she kept stiller than ever she had done in her life.

"Sh!" whispered the being at last.

"Oh, what?" said Hilary aloud.

"Tut! You've frightened it again."

"What?"

"A squirrel, of course! Weren't you watching it? I thought you were, when you came on tiptoe." This time the speaker turned. "Oh, I see!" he went on. "You are frightened yourself. Well, you needn't be. I shan't eat you, little girl." And he sighed so sadly that Hilary's fear diminished.

"I—I'm not really frightened," she whispered. "I'm sorry I frightened your squirrel, Mr.—Brownie."

"Eh, what?"

"I meant to say—Mr. Gnome," she stammered. "Oh, aren't you a Gnome, please?"

At this the strange being gave a laugh.

"Oh, yes, yes!" he cried. "Of course I'm a Gnome! Why, certainly! Pray, how did you guess it, little girl?"

"I just guessed it," replied Hilary, satisfaction in her cleverness putting her more at ease. "You see, I've read about Gnomes, and father and mother have told me lots about them."

"And aren't you afraid of—er—Gnomes?"

"N-n-no."

"Sure?"

"Not now, Mr. Gnome."

He smiled. And Hilary saw his eyes clearly, and forgot his mouth.

"Then, if you are not afraid," he said, "come and sit beside me for a little while, and watch for the squirrel."

Hilary hung back.

"Ah, you are afraid, little girl!"

He looked so disappointed that, after picking up her doll, she went cautiously towards him.

"Father says that Gnomes would not hurt any one," she remarked shyly.

"I am obliged to your father," he returned. "Here is a nice bit of grass for you; and if we keep quiet, we may see the squirrel again."

"Please," said Hilary, after what seemed to her an exceedingly long silence, during which she noticed that his face was not so old as she had first thought—"please, won't you tell me about Gnomes?"

"About Gnomes? What shall I tell you?" He looked amused in a sad way. "Suppose you ask me questions, and I'll try to answer them. But you are a Fairy, aren't you?"

"Oh, no!" said Hilary, feeling pleased all the same. "I'm just a little girl. My name is Hilary Malory Steele, and I'm living with my Aunt Rachel in the house you can't see from here, because father and mother are away on the yacht. Mother has been so ill all winter, but she is almost better now. Have

you got a name, or do you wish me to call you just Mr. Gnome?"

"If you please. We Gnomes have not got pretty names like you, Miss Steele."

"But I'm always called Hilary."

"Miss Hilary, then."

"Just Hilary. Now I'm going to ask you a question, Mr. Gnome. How did you get here?"

"Here? I didn't know I was trespassing."

"I don't know that word. Is it a Gnome word? But, please, how did you get here when the sun was shining, and when Gnomes should be under the ground or hiding in the mountains?"

"Ah, well, let me see, now. How *did* I get here?"

He appeared to think hard.

"Did the King of the Gnomes allow you out for a treat?"

"Yes, that's it. You see, we Gnomes get certain holidays every year——"

"That isn't in the book, Mr. Gnome."

"But, you see," he replied hurriedly, "no book is always correct. The cleverest writing people forget something now and then. Besides, you can't expect mere human people to know *everything* about Gnomes, can you?"

"No," Hilary slowly admitted. "Please go on, Mr. Gnome."

"Well, little girl, the King said I might have ten days' holiday; and that's how I came here. And, of course," he went on quickly, "I had to get these human clothes for the occasion. The clothes we wear—er—underground are different, you know."

"I know. You wear leather clothes. They must be uncomfy. Do you like being here, Mr. Gnome?"

"Very much."

"Do you go under the ground at night, or stay and play with the other Gnomes when they come up?"

"I'm afraid I daren't answer that question."

"Would the King be angry?"

"Very likely."

"What do you do when you are not having holidays?"

"Work."

"But what do you work at?"

"Quill-driving," he said, with a smile.

"What is that, Mr. Gnome?"

"Nothing very fine, Miss Hilary, but better than doing nothing."

"Do all Gnomes do it?"

"Oh, no! But a good many do. By the bye, you must not tell anybody that I'm a Gnome. It's one of the laws that we have to look as little like Gnomes as possible during our holidays. You see, I have even learned your language."

"But you are very like a Gnome, Mr. Gnome. I knew you at once."

He gave a short laugh.

"So you did, little girl—so you did."

"But you don't mind my knowing?" she said gently.

"I promise not to tell anybody, Mr. Gnome."

"Thank you! No, I don't mind your knowing. But your aunt might not like your speaking to a—Gnome."

"Oh!" cried Hilary, jumping up. "I must run home."

"Must you go?"

Hilary nodded regretfully.

"And you've told me so little about Gnomes."

"I could tell you more if—— But I've got only three days of my holiday left, and I don't suppose I'll see you again before I go."

"Under the ground. Poor Mr. Gnome! Perhaps I could come here again—if Aunt Rachel would have another headache. But I'm afraid she won't."

Mr. Gnome smiled.

"Well, I come here every afternoon," he said. "I should like to see you once more, before I go under the ground, little girl. Will you shake hands with me now?"

Hilary did so, noticing that his fingers were very long and thin.

"But you must not get into trouble by staying too long with me. Good-bye, Miss Hilary!"

"Good-bye, Mr. Gnome! I'll try to come another day."

She ran down the path, stopping once to wave her hand to him.

It was difficult to keep her wonderful secret that night.

The next afternoon she was taken by Miss Wallis for a dreadfully long, dull drive; but the next again she found an opportunity, thanks to visitors, to slip away to the wood.

Sure enough, Mr. Gnome was there in the self-same spot, and appeared so glad to see her that her shyness vanished at once. He seemed in good spirits and told her far more about Gnomes, without her asking, than ever she had heard or imagined. Some of the things he told her were not in agreement with the book; but, as Mr. Gnome pointed out, there was nothing surprising in a Gnome knowing more about his own people than a mere human being could ever hope to discover.

When he had talked of Gnomes for half an hour or so, he suddenly changed the subject by asking her if she liked sweets, at the same time producing a packet of Russian toffee.

Hilary was a trifle disappointed that the dainty, though desirable, was so familiar. After thanking him prettily, she said:

"Do Gnomes have sweets of their own—different from these?"

"No; they haven't any sweets, Hilary. They haven't any money to buy sweets with, or anything else that's nice."

"No money?"

"No money."

Hilary, at considerable risk, swallowed the cake of toffee she was just beginning to enjoy, and regarded Mr. Gnome inquiringly, if not suspiciously.

"How did you buy the toffee, then, if you have no money?"

Mr. Gnome's dark, ugly face reddened. He laughed feebly.

"Where did you get this toffee, Mr. Gnome?" demanded Hilary.

"In a little shop, kept by an old woman, in the village. I got it last night."

"When she was asleep? Oh, Mr. Gnome, did you—did you steal it?"

Mr. Gnome tried to smile, but the child's grey eyes were too serious.

"I suppose you didn't know any better, but it was very naughty of you, Mr. Gnome," she said at last, more in sorrow than in anger. "Oh, fancy stealing toffee from an old woman when she was asleep! Aren't you ashamed?"

"But you must remember I'm only a Gnome," he said, after a pause.

"Yes; that does make some difference, But, oh, how could you? And oh!" (her eyes opened their widest), "you've got a watch and chain, and boots and stockings, and clothes and a collar" (Mr. Gnome

had on a white one now) "and a tie! How could you get all these things when you had no money?"

Mr. Gnome was now in a fearful tangle of his own making.

"How, indeed?" he murmured helplessly. "Perhaps they were given to me as presents, Hilary."

"Aren't you sure?"

"Not quite. It's rather difficult for a Gnome to be sure of anything, you know."

Hilary wagged her head till her dark curls danced.

"Who gave you your watch and chain? Does your watch have a key, or just a little thing for turning round?"

"It has a key. Would you like to see me wind it, Hilary?"

"Yes—oh, no! You haven't told me who gave you your watch and chain," she said severely.

"What would you say if I told you I had stolen them, like the toffee?"

"I don't know."

"Let us assume that I stole them."

"Assume! That's surely a Gnome word. What does it mean?"

"Suppose I stole them."

"But did you?"

Mr. Gnome was silent. He hardly knew what to say.

"It isn't so bad to be naughty—when you confess," urged Hilary, not unkindly.

"Gnomes hardly ever confess."

"Oh! That's dreadful! If I didn't confess often, I'd burst. You mustn't laugh, Mr. Gnome. I'm so sorry for you; and I'm so sorry for the old woman in the village. Oh, how could you steal her toffee when she was asleep? Did you get in through the key-hole or down the chimney?"

Her frown gave place to an expression of pure curiosity.

"I don't remember. Are you sorry I'm a Gnome, little girl?"

"Oh, no!" she answered quickly. "I'm glad you are a Gnome, Mr. Gnome."

He sighed.

"But I wish you could behave better."

He sighed again.

"Are you sorry?" she inquired, gently.

"Yes, I'm sorry, Hilary."

After some thought, she said softly:

"Then I mustn't scold you any more. But you must try hard to be a better Gnome."

She fumbled in her pocket, and fished out a tiny purse. "I have some money that father gave me. It won't pay for all the things you've got, Mr. Gnome, but it will pay for the toffee (I know that sort of toffee costs sixpence), and you can leave the money in the shop when the poor old woman is sleeping. You needn't confess to her, since you've confessed to me. Here, Mr. Gnome! Take it, please."

She held out the sixpence.

He drew back.

"Oh, I can't take your money, little girl?"

"But you must, Mr. Gnome."

Presently, to save her from tears, he took the coin, meaning to return it somehow.

"And now," said Hilary, brightening—"now we can eat up the toffee!"

Which she did.

When it was finished, she remembered her aunt.

"I'm going away to-morrow," he was saying. "I wish we had met sooner."

"So do I. I like you, Mr. Gnome, though you are

not very good. But then you don't know any better. Do you go under when you go away from here?"

"Yes—under."

"Under this very place?"

"No; far from here. But I'll be here to-morrow afternoon."

Hilary gave him her small hand.

"I'll try to come, Mr. Gnome. You never finished the story about the Gnome that fell in love with a Fairy."

"Ah, that's a long story, because, Hilary, the Gnome never fell out of love with the Fairy."

"But they lived happily, ever after?"

He smiled almost tenderly.

"At any rate, the Fairy made the Gnome happier than he had ever been before. Good-bye, little girl."

Hilary ran till she saw the garden-gate. Then she went slowly, and hugged her doll. She could not tell why, but there was a lump in her throat that really hurt her.

The next afternoon rain fell heavily. Miss Wallis had to go out, and came home with a touch of rheumatism, which made her cross. "What are you brooding over, child?" she exclaimed, a little while before Hilary's bed-time.

"I'm reading, Aunt Rachel," corrected Hilary.

"That Fairy nonsense again?"

"I'm reading about a Gnome, Aunt Rachel."

"Rubbish!"

The little girl's eyes filled with tears.

"There *are* Gnomes!" she sobbed.

"Nonsense!"

Hilary opened her mouth, and then shut it tightly. She would keep the secret.

In her white bed that night she wept for the poor Gnome who had got to go under.

She could not resist going to the wood on the following afternoon, although in order to get away she had to dodge her aunt round the garden. She wanted just to see where the Gnome had lain. She would not wait a minute. But the Gnome was there, on the patch of vivid green.

"The King has allowed me to stay for one afternoon extra," he explained. "I go under to-night."

"What a nice King!" she remarked, delighted to see Mr. Gnome once more.

But somehow he proved a dull companion. To get him to talk she had to ask many questions, and sometimes he told her things about Gnomes which she could not possibly accept as true.

And when she gave him the bunch of pansies she had picked in the garden for her doll, he thanked her in a way that made her feel miserable.

"Are you sorry you are going away under, Mr. Gnome?"

"Very sorry. Are you a little sorry, little girl?"

"I was sorry last night."

"Not to-day?"

"Are you going to try to be a good Gnome?" she asked, after a moment's consideration.

"Yes."

He fell silent, his eyes on the dusky hollow. He did indeed look sorry, dreadfully sorry, she thought.

"Dear Mr. Gnome," she said, impulsively, "I wish you weren't going away. I wish I could see you every day."

"Dear, kind little girl!" he murmured.

The faint sound of a bell reached her ears. It was the summons to tea, rung at the open door of her aunt's house.

"Oh, I must run home fast!" she said, quickly rising. "Good-bye, Mr. Gnome. I hope you won't be

very unhappy where you are going. Good-bye! I'm so glad you are a Gnome. I'll tell father and mother all about you when they come home next week."

He smiled resignedly.

"Good-bye, dear little Hilary."

He did not get up, not because he was rude, but because he was sensitive.

She took a couple of steps from him—and came back.

"Would you like me to kiss you, Mr. Gnome?"

"If you would, Hilary."

Soon she was out of his sight.

Two mornings later, the post brought Hilary a beautiful book of fairy-tales. Her own name was very neatly written upon the fly-leaf, but nothing else.

The dwarf clambered upon the high office-stool, and unlocked his desk.

"Had a good holiday, Morgan?" inquired his neighbour clerk, wondering what sort of holiday such a poor, misshapen, lonely chap could possibly have.

"Very good indeed, Francis," was the quiet answer.

Towards the afternoon his neighbour jocularly remarked:

"Feeling it a bit slow after your holiday, Morgan? That's the tenth time within the hour you've looked at your watch!"

"Perhaps I do feel it a bit slow, Francis."

Morgan, however, had not been looking at his watch, but at a sixpence attached to the ring of it.

XIV

FOR A GOOD BOY

I

"AWFU' little news in the paper," remarked John Robinson to his wife, who had been in one of her silent moods since tea-time.

"I wisht Macgregor was in." Lizzie lifted her eyes from the pinafore she was repairing to the clock. "It's time he was in his bed, an' he's got a' his lessons to learn for the morn." She turned to her man, shirt-sleeved and taking his ease by the kitchen hearth. "It'll no' dae, John. Ye'll ha'e to speak to him serious-like; an' if speakin' doesna gar him improve, ye'll jist ha'e to——"

"Aw, the wean's fine, Lizzie." John smiled, dropped the paper and took out his pipe.

"He isna fine! He gets waur every day. An' it's his fayther's fau't. He thinks he can get daein' onything he likes. I tell ye, he's got to be checkit, an' if you're no' gaun to dae yer duty——"

"Weel, weel, I'll gi'e him a word o' comfort when he comes in, wife," said John, between puffs. "But it's a fine nicht for playin' ootbye, an' I mind when I was a wean masel'——"

"That's easy mindit, for ye've never been onything else!"

At this Mr. Robinson laughed heartily. "Aweel, ye've wisdom for the twa o' us, woman." Becoming

graver—"Wud ye like me to gang oot an' seek Macgregor?"

Ere Lizzie could reply, the bell tinkled. "That'll be Mrs. McOstrich. I promised to lend her the bew (blue) vases an' twa-three tidies for her pairty the morn's nicht," she said, rising.

"I thocht the party wasna till next week."

"So it was. But an auld aunt o' Mistress McOstrich was ta'en badly yesterday, an' Mistress McOstrich's thocht she'd better hurry on the pairty in case onything serious happened—— Whisht, man! It's naething to laugh at." Lizzie disappeared, and presently showed in Mrs. McOstrich, the wife of a baker in the vicinity, a weary-looking, elderly, little woman. She carried a large basket.

"Fine nicht, mistress," said John, pleasantly, getting up and nodding. "An' hoo's the guidman the nicht?"

"Aw, thenk ye," replied Mrs. McOstrich, in melancholy tones, "he's jist aboot his usual. He gets that wearit efter he's had his tea, he wouldna heed an earthquake." She turned to her hostess. "It's rael kind o' ye, Mistress Robi'son, to lend me yer maist gorgeous ornaments, an' I'll tak' terrible guid care o' them——"

"Will ye no tak' aff yer shawl an' sit doon?" said Lizzie kindly.

"Na, na, I daurna bide, thenk ye a' the same. Ye see, ma man's that wearit, an' he'll be wantin' to gang til his bed." Brightening for a moment—"Yer guid-sister Mistress Purdie's comin' the morn's nicht!"

"Oh, is she?" murmured Lizzie, who found it hard to keep friends with her moneyed sister-in-law.

"That'll be a cookie extra!" said John, and guffawed.

"John!" exclaimed his wife.

"Oh, let yer man ha'e his bit joke," sighed the visitor. "Ma man hasna made a joke for seeven-an'-twenty year—no' since he tell't me I was like a giraffe. 'Deed, it's nae fun bein' a baker, an' it's less bein' mairrit on yin. If folk thocht what it meant to be mairrit on a baker, their mornin' rolls wud choke them. Mistress Purdie's unco lucky to be mairrit on a grocer. It's wonderfu' hoo folk in the grocery trade flee up in the world nooadays. Ma man's aye wishin' he was a grocer—espaycially at three o'clock on a cauld frosty mornin'. Oh, dear! I never seen a man like him for sleepin'! An' whiles he has the maist terrible bad dreams. The ither nicht, he dreamed he was a cake o' gingerbread that wudna rise, an' his struggles was something awfu'."

"D'ye tell me that?" said Lizzie sympathetically, while John put his hand to his mouth. "But could he no' change to the grocery trade?"

Mrs. McOstrich wagged her beshawled grey head. "Na, na. It's ower late noo. The Ethiopian canna change his spots, nor——"

"There's Macgregor!" cried John, going to the door in response to a knock.

When father and son appeared, Mrs. McOstrich was packing the borrowed ornaments in her basket and profusely thanking the lender.

"Here's his lordship!" John announced proudly.

"Macgregor," said Lizzie, "what d'ye mean, stoppin' ootbye till this time o' nicht? I've a guid mind to——"

Mrs. McOstrich gently interposed. "Aw, the wee man! D'ye no' ken me?"

"Fine! Ye're Mistress McOstrich. I'm comin' to yer pairty the morn's nicht. Ha'e ye got our bew vases there?"

"Macgregor!" Lizzie whispered warningly.

The boy, on the safe side of his father, continued: "I like your pairties. Ye've aye plenty pastries. I wisht ma paw was a baker."

"Whisht!" cried his mother. "If ye canna behave yersel', ye'll no' get to the pairty——"

"Toots, Lizzie! the wean's fine," said John.

Thus encouraged, Macgregor proceeded: "I'm gaun to ha'e a pairty, tae, on Hogmanay. Will ye come, Mistress?"

Curbing herself Lizzie said quietly: "Never heed him, Mistress McOstrich. He's gaun to ha'e nae pairty."

Macgregor met his mother's eyes. "But paw said I was," he said, speaking as one who knows he is in the right. He turned to his father. "Did ye no', paw?"

There was a pause ere Mr. Robinson said, rather sheepishly: "Let him ha'e his pairty, Lizzie. Jist twa-three o' his wee frien's, ye ken."

"I never heard sich nonsense!" said Lizzie. "Get yer lesson book, laddie, an' learn——"

Mrs. McOstrich's sad voice came in. "It wud be rael nice for the laddie to ha'e a pairty, Mistress Robi'son."

"Na, na! He canna ha'e a pairty," said Lizzie, in a tone of finality.

"But," said Macgregor, "I've askit Wullie Thomson, an' Peter Ross, an' Jessie Mary——"

"Aweel, ye had nae business to ask onybody."

Awkwardly, John rose to the occasion.

"It's me that's to blame, Lizzie. I was gaun to speak to ye aboot it when—when I got a chance," he explained haltingly.

After all, Lizzie was not the woman to abash her good man before a third person.

"Weel, we'll see aboot it," she said at last, kindly enough. "Noo, laddie, awa' an' get yer book. John, try if ye cannot help him wi' his lesson."

"'Deed, ay, Lizzie, I'll dae that," quoth Mr. Robinson, and he and Macgregor moved with relieved countenances to the fireside.

"It's a' richt—eh, paw?" whispered the boy.

"Ay, ay," muttered John, grinning. "But we'll pey attention to yer lesson in the meantime, ma mannier."

Said Lizzie to Mrs. McOstrich: "Ye maun excuse Macgregor; he means weel."

"'Deed, ay; 'deed, ay," the baker's spouse replied; "a' weans means weel, an' whiles I think they wud dae weel, if it wasna for us auld yins." With which deplorable heresy she took her departure, just pausing at the door to assure Macgregor that there would be a sufficiency of pastry on the following evening.

Mrs. Robinson, having succeeded in stemming the torrent of gratitude which poured forth afresh at the outer door, bade the borrower of vases a friendly good-night, and then paid a brief visit to the room wherein her little daughter was sleeping. On her return to the kitchen she surprised father and son in a pleasant discussion on the subject of the latter's prospective party. Her expression hardened.

"John! Ha'e ye nae sense? See the time, and Macgregor's lessons no' learnt yet! . . . Macgregor, bring me the book, an' I'll hear ye yer spellin'." She seated herself at the table. "I tell ye, Macgregor, if ye dinna pey attention to yer lessons, ye'll never grow up to be a Lord Provost."

"I'm no' wantin' to be a Lord Provost, maw. I want to be a plumber."

Whereupon Mr. Robinson chuckled, and, hearing the same, the boy grinned.

Happily for them both, and perhaps for Lizzie also, the door-bell rang again.

"I'll gang, Lizzie." John jumped up and hurried out.

"Noo, laddie," said Lizzie, restraining herself, "spell *misery*."

"Ye're lookin' at the wrang page, maw. That was in yesterday's lesson."

Lizzie cleared her throat. "Spell *dungeon*."

"D . . . U . . . N——"

"Tak' yer time. Spell it in bits. Dun-geon. Dun?"

"D . . . U . . . N."

"Geon."

"J . . . O . . . H . . . N——Geon——Dungeon!" said Macgregor smartly.

Lizzie groaned. "Tak' the book an' learn it. An' if ye canna say it——"

The door was pushed open, and John's voice cried: "He thocht he wud surprise ye."

Lizzie turned. "Fayther!"

"Gran'paw Purdie," Macgregor shouted, dropping his book and running to the old man.

"Weel, ma dochter, an' hoo's a' wi' ye," said Mr. Purdie heartily. "An' ma auld frien' Macgreegor!" He took the youngster's hand. "I was feart ye wud be awa' to yer bed."

"No' likely!"

"Macgreegor," his mother interposed, "pick up yer book, an' awa' ben aside wee Jeanie an' learn yer lessons. But see an' no' wauken her."

"But I want to bide——"

"Preserve us!" ejaculated the old man, taking the chair proffered by his son-in-law. "Is the laddie no' feenished wi' his lessons? I doobt he's bein' ower hard wrought. I'm no' agreein' wi' weans ha'ein' ower many lessons to learn at nicht."

"Macgreegor didna come in when he should ha'e come in," said Lizzie. "It's a' his ain fau't that he's no' feenished wi' his lessons."

"Och, Lizzie, never heed aboot that," said John, with an insinuating glance at his wife. "The ween's fine. An' he'll be gettin' his holidays in twa-three days."

"I'm gaun to ha'e a pairty on Hogmanay, gran'-paw," the boy announced. "Will ye come?"

"Dae what I bid ye, Macgreëgor," his mother commanded.

"Maybe," Mr. Purdie mildly interrupted—"maybe he wudna tak' very lang to learn his lessons."

Lizzie was tired that night; her wrongs got the better of her. "It's no' jist his lessons, fayther," she said. "It's his disobedience. Ay, an' he's gettin' that impiddent."

"I'm no' impiddent, maw," her son protested. "I'm no' impiddent—excep' to Aunt Purdie, an' she's impiddent to me."

Once more John made matters worse by sniggering. The colour rose in Lizzie's face.

Mr. Purdie, who, it must be confessed, had come near to sniggering himself, held up his hand, and said soothingly. "Jist a moment, Lizzie. I've a word or twa to say to Macgreëgor." He dropped his hand on the boy's arm and drew him gently against his knee.

"Listen, laddie. I was thinkin' aboot ye comin' up in the steamboat the day, and I was wonderin' what I wud gi'e ye for yer Ne'erday,¹ if——"

"What are ye gaun to gi'e us, gran'paw?"

"Patience, patience! What I wud gie ye for yer Ne'erday—if ye was guid, an' diligent, an' obedient, an' weel-behaved till the end o' the year. Noo it's no' vera lang till the end o' the year—jist ten days—an' I've nae doobt ye could please yer paw an' maw rael weel for that time, if ye was tryin'. D'ye see?"

¹ Ne'erday = New Year's Day (gift).

"Ay, I see—I'll try . . . What are ye gaun to gi'e us?"

"It'll be a prize for guid conduct." Mr. Purdie smiled on the parents, and turned again to his grandson. "Weel, I was thinkin' o' a watch an' chain."

"Dod, that'll be fine!" cried John delightedly.

"A watch an' chain!" murmured Lizzie. "Oh, fayther!"

Macgregor looked straight in the old face. "D'ye mean a penny yin, gran'paw?"

"Macgreigor!"—a warning whisper from Lizzie.

Mr. Purdy laughed. "Na, na, laddie. A real silver watch an' chain!"

"Wi' a key to wind it? I like the sort wi' a key—same as your auld yin. I dinna like the sort——"

"Macgreigor," Lizzie exclaimed, "haud yer tongue an' say 'thank ye' to yer gran'paw."

"But I ha'ena got it yet, maw.—Wi' a key to wind it, gran'paw?"

"I'll tak' a note o' the key, ma mannie," was the good-humoured assurance of Mr. Purdie. "But ye'll no' forget ye've got to *win* the prize," he added, at a hint from his daughter.

"I'll no' forget," Macgregor said confidently.

There was a pause that lasted till Lizzie managed to catch her son's eye.

"I'll awa' an' learn ma lessons," said Macgregor cheerfully, and picking up his book left the room.

"A guid beginnin'," remarked Mr. Purdie, smiling, and bringing out his pipe.

"Oh, he'll win the prize easy," said John, with a laugh. "Eh, wife?"

Lizzie's expression softened. "I wonder hoo wee Jeanie made that big hole in her pinny," she said, taking up her sewing.

II

When we come to think of it, ten days is a long time to be good, and diligent, and obedient, *and* well-behaved. Which of us would venture to promise stability in these qualities over that period? Which of us would deserve a prize at the end thereof? As Gran'paw Purdie said on the last night of the year—but stay; Gran'paw Purdie shall speak for himself presently.

No boy worthy of the name can win a prize for good conduct. At best, a boy may be awarded a prize for conduct less bad than that of his fellows. The phrase good conduct, however, hath a smugly pleasing sound to very young children and also to adults who affect to have forgotten their own youthful peccadillos.

It was only to be expected that Macgregor would plunge from failure into failure. Nevertheless failure involves the existence of endeavours to succeed. And, curiously enough, the more outstanding failures of those ten days were not so much due to Macgregor's badness, idleness, disobedience, and ill-behaviour as to certain circumstances, examples of which ought in common fairness to be recorded.

Macgregor would certainly not have started to climb that lamp-post in the dark had his friend Willie Thomson, instead of daring him to perform the feat, informed him that the lamp-post was freshly adorned with green paint.

Nor would he have been foot of his class on the last day of the term had Willie Thomson, whose turn it was to occupy that seat of dishonour, refrained from taking an unlawful holiday. Nor, during the Saturday visit to the Zoo with his parents, would he have permitted a monkey to take his new hat (which his

mother had insisted on his wearing), however "daft" he miserably felt it to be, had not the monkey snatched it from his head while he was busy telling his mother how he hated it. Nor, finally, would he have left the little jam tart, purloined from Mrs. McOstrich's supper-table, upon a certain chair, had he foreseen that his most severe and superior relative Aunt Purdie would sit thereon.

But without these extenuating circumstances, which grown up people could hardly be expected to appreciate, the four misdeeds were surely sufficient in themselves to blot out the vision of a shining prize. They did so, undoubtedly, so far as Lizzie was concerned, though she disguised her despair in exhortation and encouragement until the eleventh hour, until which hour Macgregor replied that the watch must have a key. John continued, or professed to continue, sanguine, pointing out that they were not called upon to report all their son's misdeeds to the grandfather, and that Aunt Purdie was hardly likely to report the jam tart incident for fear of ridicule.

"Honesty," Lizzie said, with the heavy sigh of one deploring a dreary fact, "is the best policy; an' if Macgregor doesna deserve the prize, he's no' gaun to get it."

"He'll deserve it yet, wife," returned John, and reeled off a long list of crimes which Macgregor might have—but had not—committed.

"An' he doesna deserve to ha'e a pairty, neither," she said. "Ye ken that yersel', John."

"No' bein' a prize, it doesna matter," he replied lightly. "Cheer up, Lizzie! He's nae waur nor I was when I was his age." Here followed a fearful list of John's juvenile delinquencies.

"Man," she interrupted at last, "I've got a conscience!"

"Weel, ma dear, that's no' your fau't, an' I'm no' blamin' ye."

So it came to Hogmanay.¹

John, ignoring his wife's many protests, all more or less to the effect that he was aping "the gentry," had decorated the kitchen with diagonals of paper flowers, slung from the four corners of the roof, a couple of Chinese lanterns hung from the drying pole, and sundry sprigs of holly stuck in likely places.

The "company" consisted of Gran'paw and Gran'maw Purdie, Willie Thomson, Macgregor's chief chum, two other small boys, three little girls, whom Macgregor had not been particularly keen on inviting, and a bigger girl, Jessie Mary, aged fourteen, who acted as Lizzie's lieutenant in organising games and keeping order generally. Aunt and Uncle Purdie were expected later, when the juvenile entertainment was over, to assist the elders in bringing in the New Year—at which ceremony, by the way, Macgregor's presence was to be permitted on condition that he was "extra good" throughout the evening. Mrs. McOstrich had been unable to accept Macgregor's invitation. Despite the fact that New Year's Day was a holiday in the bakehouse, Mr. McOstrich insisted on retiring at his customary hour, eight o'clock, and consequently his spouse must stay at home. But the kindly woman had sent a large assortment of buns and pastries, which Macgregor and his young friends welcomed without any apparent regret at the donor's absence. It was unanimously agreed, however, that to be closely related to a baker was the most desirable thing in the world.

For the space of a couple of hours all went so brightly, so smoothly, and Macgregor behaved so nicely—towards even the little girls—that hope, mori-

¹ December 31.

bund for days, stirred softly in the mother heart. The watch and chain might yet be the laddie's property and her pride. Mrs. Robinson was roused from such a reverie by her husband's voice above the childish din.

"Here, Lizzie, what's next on the programme?"

Joining the little throng, she appealed to Jessie Mary. "Something they can a' play at, lassie."

"Bee-baw-babbity," said Jessie Mary, and was echoed by the smaller guests.

"Ach, that's a daft game," said Willie Thomson, contemptuously.

"Ay," Macgregor agreed. "It's a daft——"

Lizzie was swiftly upon him, a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Mind what yer gran'paw's maybe got for ye if ye're a guid laddie, dearie," she whispered.

Macgregor hesitated. "Ye're sure it'll ha'e a key? Wullie Thomson, come on an' play, or I'll gi'e ye a bat on the nose."

"Gaun! hit me!" said Willie truculently, stepping forward in an attitude of defence.

John interposed, laughing, and presently the game, which is of the kiss-in-the-ring order, was set agoing.

It fell to Macgregor to be first in the centre. He didn't like the part, but was determined to go through with it. With a self-conscious smirk he knelt to the words:

Kneel down, kiss the crown,
Kiss the crown, kiss the crown,
Kneel down, kiss the crown,
Kiss a bonny wee lassie.

The singing ceased, the dancers halted. The small boys sniggered, the little girls looked modestly expectant. Macgregor looked very unhappy.

"Come awa', Macgreegor," his grandfather called encouragingly from the fireside.

"The dear!" murmured his grandmother.

Macgregor took a step in Jessie Mary's direction.

"That's the boy!" cried John.

Macgregor took another step.

"Haw, haw!" laughed Willie Thomson. "He's for the big yin!"

Ere Macgregor could turn, Jessie Mary, doubtless to end his embarrassment ran forward and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Haw, haw!" laughed Willie again.

Threateningly, Macgregor went close to him. "What are ye laughin' at?"

"Haw, haw! Ye kissed her. Haw!——"

"I didna! If ye say that again, I'll gi'e ye a——"

Jessie Mary put herself between the threatening fists.

"Wullie Thomson," she said indignantly, "if ye dinna behave yessel'——"

"I believe ye kissed him first," cried Willie, with more guffaws.

With a toss of her head Jessie Mary retorted: "I wudna kiss you if ye was the only man in the world!"

"I wudna gi'e ye the chance!" yelled Willie, and fell upon Macgregor.

"Tits! tits!" cried John, separating the combatants. "This'll never dae. Wullie, shake hauns wi' Macgregor, an' tell Jessie Mary ye're sorry."

After some persuasion the boys shook hands—rather limply, it must be allowed.

"Noo, Wullie, tell Jessie Mary ye're sorry."

Said Jessie: "He can keep his sorry. I'm no' in wi' him ony mair." And, with another toss of her head, moved away.

Next moment Lizzie's arm went round her neck. "Lassie, ye've been a terrible help to me the nicht. Dinna let onything spile Macgregor's pairty noo."

She led the girl back to the cause of the disturbance. "Wullie, here's Jessie Mary ready to forgi'e ye."

"I'm no' heedin'," returned the boy sullenly. "I mean, I'm sorry. Onything for peace." He walked off to the table against the wall, and presently he and Macgregor were sharing an orange, while Gran'paw Purdie, with a chuckle of relief, relit his pipe, and gran'maw, still nervous, pretended to resume knitting. Jessie Mary's proposal to play at "spin-the-plate" was hailed with general approval.

"I'll get a plate," cried Macgregor, and, with the aid of a chair, scrambled upon the dresser.

"Stop, laddie!" exclaimed Lizzie, starting to cross the floor.

"I can manage fine, maw," he replied, taking a large plate from the rack.

"Na, na. Pit it doon this meenute!"

A dismal crash was followed by a more dismal silence. Macgregor's knuckles went to his eyes. "Ye shuldna ha'e tell't me to pit it doon, maw."

With a choking sound Mrs. Robinson stooped to collect the fragments of one of her "best."

John and the grandparents hastened to the scene of disaster.

"Dinna greet, dearie," said gran'maw.

"I'm no' greetin'," mumbled Macgregor.

His father lifted him down and patted his shoulder. "Never heed, Lizzie. He didna mean to break it. An'—an' it's Hogmanay," he said. "I'll sune get ye a plate, Macgregor." He mounted the chair. . . . "Here's yin."

Mrs. Robinson rose swiftly to her feet. "No' that yin, John!" she screamed.

Crash!

John followed the plate to the floor, looking less crestfallen, perhaps, than might have been expected.

With something like a sob Lizzie fell on her knees beside the new wreckage.

There was a silence. Macgregor turned from one parent to the other. Then he went to his mother, and touched her rather diffidently.

"Never heed, maw," he said in a low voice. "He didna mean it. An' it's Hogmanay."

"Aw, the wee man!" Gran'maw Purdie softly exclaimed.

At this point John slipped from the room.

Gran'paw Purdie created a diversion by toddling to the dresser and declaring his intention of "trying his luck." This set the company smiling, and brought Lizzie to her feet.

"Na, na, fayther," she cried, half laughing, half crying, as she restrained his arm.

"Weel, Lizzie," he said, drawing Macgregor to his side, "never heed aboot the plates. Ye can get plenty mair like them, but ye'll never get anither Hogmanay like this."

Lizzie said nothing, but proceeded to take down one of her old plates which she handed to Jessie Mary.

The game went merrily until Willie Thomson having got the plate, called Macgregor, who in turn called Willie, who again called Macgregor, who once more called Willie, who for the third time called Macgregor——

"That'll no' dae," Jessie Mary interrupted, seizing the plate. "Ye maun cry somebody else."

Trouble seemed imminent when the door was thrown open and John came in, flourishing a bunch of gaily coloured rubber balloons on strings.

"See what Mistress McOstrich has sent ye a'," he cried, and was forthwith mobbed by shrieking children.

There was a balloon for each one, and joy seemed to have reached its climax, and Jessie Mary was re-

turning the plate to the rack, when from the smallest boy arose a most doleful wailing. He was immediately surrounded by sympathetic inquirers.

"Naebody cried on me to spin the p-plate," he sobbed at last.

"Never heed, Johnny," said Macgregor. "I'll let ye bash ma heid wi' yer balloon." He obligingly bent his poll. "Gaun! Bash it!"

A grin puckered Johnny's wet features and he promptly let fly. So did Willie Thomson. So did the rest of the children. A general scrimmage ensued. The air was full of balloons and yells of delight. Gran'paw slapped his knee and chuckled. Gran'maw's smile was wavering and anxious. The bell rang, but no one heard it save Lizzie, who went quietly out.

"But it was rael nice o' Macgregor to let the wee laddie bash his heid," said Gran'maw to her spouse. "Ye'll ha'e to mind that when ye're decidin' about the prize."

Despite the din John caught the latter remark.

"D'ye think Macgreegor's got ony chance noo, Maister Purdie?" he inquired of his father-in-law, with assumed carelessness. "I ken he hasna been as guid as he micht ha'e been——"

"Weel, John," the old man said, rubbing his hands, "I'm no' gaun to be severe on yer son. Efter a', there's nane o' us ha'e been as guid as we micht ha'e been—even in the last ten days. An' so I've decided to gi'e Macgreegor the prize—if he's guid frae noo till the end o' the year!"

John beamed his satisfaction. "I think Macgreegor'll manage that!" he said, and seizing a balloon joined in the fray.

The door opened. Entered Aunt Purdie in all her haughtiness and grandeur.

A hush fell upon the merry-makers. They withdrew with one accord from the field of fun.

Aunt Purdie halted and surveyed the scene with a severe eye.

"Sich a pandemolium!" she exclaimed, and looked round coldly for an explanation.

Lizzie, who had followed her, replied rather nervously: "Oh, it's jist Macgregor ha'ein' a wee pairty for his Hogmanay."

"Oh, indeed!" The visitor undid a button of her crimson cloak. "My friend Mrs. McCluny's children are having a party on the tenth of January. Mrs. McCluny's paying a man to play the pianoforte. Of course, in her position——"

"Will ye no' tak' a chair, Mistress Purdie?" ventured John, who was looking particularly red and foolish.

Aunt Purdie joined the old folks at the fireside. but declined a seat.

"I am thankful to say that my friend Mrs. McCluny's nervous breakdown has been perverted, though last night she was trembling like an ashpan leaf," she announced. "I jist dropped in to tell you that Robert and me would not be able to arrive here till near midnight. Robert is extremely busy at the emporium——"

"Paw," said Macgregor, who had been listening, "is that whaur they keep livin' fish—swimmin' about in tanks?"

"Whisht!" whispered Lizzie.

John laughed and checked himself. "Na, na, Macgregor, she means yer uncle's shop."

Ignoring the interruption, though the word "shop" was almost more than she could bear, Aunt Purdie proceeded: "And I am going to the theatre with the doctor and Mrs. McCluny, and afterwards to

supper at their house. Mrs. McCluny and me . . .” A long story of social functions of superior quality followed.

Meanwhile the children were grouped round the kitchen, wondering when they were going to be happy again. Willie Thomson drew Macgregor into a corner. The two boys began to converse in whispers.

“Did ye ever try sittin’ doon on yin o’ them?” inquired Willie, indicating his balloon.

“Naw. What does it dae?”

“It mak’s a rare bang.” A pause. “I wud like fine to see yer aunt sitting doon on yin.”

“So would I,” Macgregor admitted. “But I wudna try it on till efter Ne’erday, Wullie.”

Willie’s smile was pitying. “Aw, ye’re thinkin’ o’ yer watch an’ chain, Macgregor. But ye’ve nae chance noo. I heard what ye did at Mistress Mc-Ostrich’s pairty an’ at the Zoo. Oh, ye canna win the prize.”

“Maybe—maybe I’ll get it for—for lettin’ Jessie Mary kiss me.”

“My! ye’re green! Ye’ll never get it for that. But”—Willie’s lips went closer to his friend’s ear—“I’ll tell ye hoo ye might get it.”

“Hoo?”—very eagerly.

“If ye was pittin’ forward thon chair”—Willie pointed—“an’ askin’ yer aunt to sit doon, polite-like, that wud maybe please yer aunt, an’ she wud maybe tell yer gran’paw to gi’e ye the prize. D’ye see?”

“Ay, I see. But I never did anything that pleased her yet.”

“Weel, there’s yer chance.”

Macgregor took a glance at his superior relative. “She’s lookin’ awfu’ crabbit, Wullie.”

“She canna halp that. She’ll no’ look crabbit if

ye're polite-like to her. Ha'e a shot at it, onywey. I'll come wi' ye."

Macgregor plucked up courage for the desperate venture. "Come on, then. You keep ma balloon."

Followed by his friend, Macgregor advanced solemnly towards the old people.

Said gran'paw: "Here's Macgregor comin' to shake hauns wi' ye, Sarah. Come awa', ma mannie."

Aunt Purdie regarded her nephew condescendingly. "So you're having a party, are you? Well, I'm sure I hope you're all behaving yourselves."

His courage wavering, Macgregor pushed forward the chair. "Are ye no' for a sate?" he asked, barely audibly.

"The dearie!" exclaimed gran'maw. "Was that no' nice o' him? Sit doon to please him, Sarah."

"Well, upon my word!" Aunt Purdie was plainly taken aback. "Thank you, Macgregor," she said at last, almost graciously. "I did not intend for to be seated at this junction; still——"

And she sat—on the balloon which Willie, stealing behind his friend, placed like a flash beneath her.

Only Macgregor saw the action.

III

Four hours had passed way. The old clock pointed to ten minutes to midnight. A heavy silence brooded upon the kitchen. It was broken only by an occasional sigh from the people—gran'paw, gran'maw, John—round the fire.

Lizzie entered quietly, sombre of countenance, as though the house held some one seriously ill.

"Is he sleepin' yet?" asked John dismally.

His wife shook her head.

"Puir lamb!" sighed Gran'maw Purdie.

"His heart was that set on bringin' in the New Year wi' us a'," said John. "Is—is he greetin', Lizzie?"

"No' the noo."

Gran'paw spoke. "Did he say onything?"

"Na." Disconsolately Mrs. Robinson took her chair. "Aweel, Macgreegor's had his chance, an' he's lost it."

"The temptation, wife, was great," said John. "When I was a wean——"

"I ken, John. Ye wud ha'e done the same. But ye wud ha'e got punished. . . . Weel, if he's punished noo, he'll maybe be a better laddie in the year that's comin'."

"If we was lettin' him bring in the New Year, it micht *remind* him to be a better laddie. . . . Eh, Lizzie?"

Lizzie held her peace.

Gran'paw sat up in his chair. He drew from his pocket a small box. "What I want to ken is: What am I to dae with this watch an' chain?"

A sharp ring took Mrs. Robinson from her place. "It'll be Mrs. Purdie. I was feart she wud be ower offendit to come back."

Gran'paw handed the watch to John. For a space there was no sound save the click of winding as John toyed moodily with the stem. He uttered a word or two of feeble admiration and passed the watch to the old woman. "Nae doobt there's young folk in the world that *deserves* prizes for guid conduct, Maister Purdie," he said, sarcastic for the first time in his life.

At that moment Lizzie showed in—not Aunt, but Uncle, Purdie, a big, bearded, genial, successful merchant, without an ounce of affectation in his composition.

"An' hoo's a' wi' ye?" he cried. "My! ye're as quiet as mice!" He looked about him.

"Whaur's Macgregor? I thocht he was to get bringin' in——"

"Macgregor's in his bed for misbehavin' hissel', Rubbert," said Lizzie, with ponderous solemnity.

"Oh! That's bad—for us yins. Weel, he didna misbehave hissel' sae faur as I'm concerned, so"—unwrapping a parcel and taking out a huge glass-jar—"ye can gi'e him them sweeties wi' his Uncle Purdie's compliments." And the big man planted the jar on the table and seated himself beside his mother. "I thocht Sarah wud ha'e been here——"

"Oh, thank ye, thank ye, Rubbert!" cried John, and snatching up the sweets, made for the door.

Lizzie caught him just in time. She secured the jar and returned with it to the company, followed by her man, who looked abashed and possibly a little angry.

"Rubbert," she said heavily, "I canna gi'e yer sweeties to Macgregor."

"Eh? They're the best in the market. They'll no' hurt him. Tell him no' to eat mair nor a pun' a day," said Robert, laughing.

"But its no' that, Rubbert. . . . I—I maun tell ye hoo Macgregor misbehaved hissel'."

John touched her arm. "Aw, Lizzie, ye dinna need to tell Rubbert the noo."

"Puir lamb!" sighed Gran'maw.

"Ye needna tell me," said Robert, bringing out his pipe, "excep' it's funny."

"Funny!" groaned Lizzie. . . . "But I maun tell ye, Rubbert. . . . He—he got Sarah to sit doon on his balloon."

There was a dreary pause.

Then Robert, in a solemn voice, said:

"I'm rael vexed—for the balloon."

Whereat Gran'paw smote his knee and gleefully repeated the words to Gran'maw.

John's face relaxed. "There, ye see, Lizzie! It's no' as serious as ye thocht it was. Rubbert'll pit it richt wi' Sarah."

"Leave that to me," said Robert heartily.

"So I'll jist gang an' bring Macgregor," John went on. "I ken he canna win the prize, but——"

"What wey can he no' win the prize?" Uncle Purdie demanded.

"An' what's to be done wi' this?" asked Gran'maw gently, holding up the watch and chain.

"Ay!" said Gran'paw. "An' there's anither thing we should mind, Lizzie!"

"What?" asked Lizzie, wearily.

"The laddie lost his balloon!"

"Dod, ay!" exclaimed John. "I'll awa' an' bring him to ye."

"Na, John," said Lizzie. She turned to the others. "Ye're a' against me, an' it's no' fair o' ye. Ye ken fine I was jist as anxious as onybody for Macgregor to win the prize. But richt's richt, an' wrang's wrang."

"While's it's no' easy to split the difference," Uncle Purdie observed. "He's but a wean, an' it's Hogmanay.—Was that the bell, Lizzie?"

"Ay. It'll be Sarah at last. We best no' say ony mair aboot it. But Macgregor understan's as weel as me what wey he canna get the prize."

The bell rang again, and she hurried away.

"What wey," said Uncle Purdie, twinkling, "what wey dae ye no' turn the prize into a present?"

Gran'paw slapped his knee. "Man, Rubbert, ye've hit it!"

Gran'maw clapped her hands. "My! is that no' a fine notion, John?"

John hesitated. "Na," he answered sadly. "Lizzie wudna like that."

Once more Lizzie showed in a visitor, but not yet Aunt Purdie.

A thin, wizened female, garbed in rusty black, entered, dragging rather than leading a small boy of abject mien and woebegone visage. She was unknown to the company, but the small boy was still recognisable as Willie Thomson.

"I'm Wullie's aunt," she explained, refusing the chair proffered by John. "I'm vexed for disturbin' ye at this time o' nicht, but Wullie cam' hame an' said he had a pain in his inside——"

"He got naething to hurt him here," put in Lizzie, doubtless forgetful of Mrs. McOstrich's pastries.

The visitor assented with a nod, and proceeded rapidly: "But efter I had gi'ed him a dose o' medicine, he said it wasna exactly in his inside. He said it was furdur up, an' I was for pittin' on a poultice, when I discovered it was his conscience."

"His conscience!" exclaimed Gran'paw.

"Ay; jist that." She drew the boy in front of her. "Noo, Wullie," she said firmly, though not unkindly, "noo, Wullie, tell the truth."

"I—I canna," mumbled Willie, and sobbed freely.

"But ye've got to dae it. Ye promised me."

Thus adjured Willie spoke, though very indistinctly.

"It was me that—that pit the balloon ablow her. Macgreegor k-kent naething about it."

"Weel, weel!" muttered Gran'paw.

"Puir lamb!" sighed Gran'maw.

"Gang on, Wullie!" said the aunt, inexorably.

"I—I tell't Macgreegor he wud maybe get the prize if he askit her to sit doon, p-polite-like.—I want to gang hame." And the hapless youngster sobbed afresh,

The aunt looked from one to the other. "Did Macgregor no' tell ye? I thocht he wud, but Wullie said Macgregor wasna a tell-tale."

"Wullie's richt there!" said John, proudly.

"Aweel, Wullie, we best get awa' hame. Ye can tell Macgregor ye're sorry the morn."

They were moving to the door when Uncle Purdie stepped forward. "I'll get Macgregor anither the morn," he muttered to John, as he took the jar of sweets from the table. He placed it in the arms of the astounded Willie. "There, laddie! Ye've done no' sae bad. Tak' them for yer Ne'erday. They'll no' gi'e ye a pain in yer conscience, onywey."

While he was speaking Aunt Purdie entered, Lizzie having omitted to fasten the outer door. No one paid any attention to her.

Suddenly John cried: "I'm gaun to get Macgregor, Lizzie."

"Oh, John, let me gang!"

And as they both turned to go, behold! Macgregor, in his scarlet flannel night-gown, stood blinking uncertainly in the doorway.

And the clock struck the first note of midnight.

"Wait a wee!" exclaimed Gran'paw, rising in great excitement. "John! Lizzie! let me first!" He took the watch from Gran'maw's hands and almost ran to the boy.

"Ma wee man, ma wee man," he said happily, leading Macgregor to the centre of the room, while jovial sounds began to come up from the street. "Ye've won yer prize!" He placed the watch and chain in the young hands. "Ye've won yer prize!"

Speechless, Macgregor stood gazing gravely at the watch.

All gathered round, Lizzie the happiest of them all. Even Aunt Purdie's countenance seemed to soften.

It was as though, one and all, they awaited the words of an oracle.

And as the last stroke of midnight fell, Macgregor's eyes went from the watch to his grandsire's face.

"But whaur's the key?" he demanded.

XV

MR. JOHN CAW'S LOVE AFFAIR

I

As a rule, the streets of a city are more or less suggestive of the people who walk them. At first sight, they declare prosperity or failure, progress or decay, gaiety or gloom. Here and there, however, we chance upon a street that cannot be fairly classified, though we may judge it hastily according to the weather. Such a street is St. George's in the city of Glasgow. If it harbours riches or poverty, it advertises neither. It is walled chiefly by shops with dwelling-houses above them; at each end it is guarded by lofty blocks occupied by drapery or furniture firms, for it connects two streets of considerably more importance than itself. For many years it has been like a middle-aged man who goes on earning a poor but honest living while clinging fast to the gilded dreams of his youth. As it was in its beginning, so it is now—a street with possibilities.

Among those who trod its greasy pavements, one Saturday afternoon in January, was a comely woman accompanied by two children, girl and boy. The three looked tired and cross, especially the boy, whose age might have been six or seven. The girl was his senior by, perhaps, a couple of years. Mother and children were what is commonly termed "respectably dressed." As a matter of fact, they were wearing their best clothes.

"Haste ye, John," said the mother to the lagging boy—"haste ye, or I'll never tak' ye to yer auntie's again!"

"I'm no' wantin' to gang to ma auntie's again," he retorted sulkily.

"Oh, ye bad boy for to say that," exclaimed his sister, who, like many little girls of her age, was inclined to be priggish, "when yer auntie was that kind!"

"She wasna that kind!"

"She was!"

"She wasna! If ye say she was again, I'll gi'e ye a bat on the ear!"

"Whisht, John!" the mother interposed. "Behave yersel'!"

"I'll behave masel'," said John, "if ye gi'e me a penny."

"A penny! What for dae ye want a penny?"

"To buy a macaroon."

"I've nae pennies to spend on macaroons. . . . Haste ye! If ye're hungry, I'll gi'e ye a nice sugar-piece when we win hame."

"I want a penny. I seen plenty in yer purse."

"Haste ye, John!"

"I want a penny. If ye dinna gi'e me a penny I'll—I'll sit doon in the dirt."

"If ye dae that, I'll sort ye." The threat was delivered mechanically as the wearied woman plodded onward.

"Oh, maw!" cried the little girl, "see what John's daein'!"

John, having stepped off the pavement, was making as if to seat himself upon a mud-heap. He grinned wickedly.

His mother made a frantic grab at his arm, and with a screech he lost his balance and sat down.

"Ye shoved me!" he wailed, and burst into tears.

The woman dragged him to his feet. For several seconds she was speechless. Then she said wrathfully:

"Come hame till I sort ye!"

"Ye—ye shoved me! I was jist pretendin'."

"I'll pretend ye!"

At this moment an elderly man, who had been smoking his pipe in the doorway of a tobacco shop, crossed the pavement.

"See, mistress," he said pleasantly, "bring him into the shop, and I'll gi'e him a scrape. He canna gang hame like that."

The mother regarded her offspring with rage and grief.

"Thenk ye," she replied at last, "but——"

"This way, mistress, if ye please."

He led the way into the shop, past the counter, and then into an apartment which was a combination of kitchen, parlour, and bed-chamber.

"Excuse the condection o' ma room," he remarked, adding, "I'm a bachelor—but I ken what boys are. Wait till I get a knife."

"I'm vexed to trouble ye like this," said the woman.

"But I'll sort him when I get him hame."

"Ye shoved me!" muttered John, rubbing his eyes with a grimy paw.

"Oh, the story!" put in the little girl.

"Frae ma pi'nt o' view," said the tobacconist, a table-knife in one hand, and a newspaper in the other, "the unhappy event seemed to be the result o' a sort o' misunderstandin'. Come here, laddie, an' stan' as steady as ye can. I'll jist remove the superfluous glaur, an' yer mither can brush aff the rest when it's dry. This is a nice suit ye've got on," he remarked in a soothing voice as he set to work.

"It's the first day he's had it on," said the woman ruefully.

"Weel, weel, it'll no' be the last. A proper brush-in' 'll mak' it as guid as new—Mistress Fergus. Ye'll excuse me mentionin' yer name—but I ken ye weel by sicht, an' Mr. Burnside, yer lodger, is a reg'lar customer o' mines. (Steady, ma laddie!) A nice man, Mr. Burnside—something to dae wi' theaytres, I suppose frae his conversation, but no' exactly a play-actor."

"He's no' on the stage, but he's connectit wi' the stage. He's lodged wi' me for three year noo, an' he's aye behaved like a gentleman. He kent ma husband, an' when he heard ma husband was deid an' I had to keep a lodger, he cam' an' offered hissels. It was rael kind o' him, because, ye see, I had nae experience o' keepin' lodgers. But I've did ma best to suit him."

"An' I've nae doobt ye've succeeded, Mistress Fergus. If he's a parteclar aboot ither things as he is aboot his tobacco (the left leg, laddie!), ye maun be clever to ha'e suited him for three year. I was gaun to venture to say that ma name was Caw—John Caw, to be exact. It's ower the door, but it's got faded, an' I'm waitin' for better trade to get it regilded."

"Ma name's John," said the little boy, who, under the man's kindly touch, was rapidly recovering.

"Haud yer tongue, John," his mother said sharply.

"Oh, he doesna mean ony harm," said Mr. Caw mildly. "Boys will be boys, as the sayin' is. Ye'll be prood o' him yet, Mistress Fergus. An' as for yer lassie, I've nae doobt she's a great help to ye, though she's young."

At this the little girl, who had been inclined to sulk, beamed brightly at the speaker, and seemed inclined to regard her brother more tolerantly.

Followed a short silence, during which Mr. Caw completed the scraping process.

"There!" he said, rising from his knees, and keeping his hand on the boy's shoulder, "that's a wee thing cleaner. But dinna sit in the dirt again, ma laddie."

John opened his mouth to explain that he had been shoved, but thought better of it.

"I'm greatly obleeged to ye for yer kindness," said Mrs. Fergus, "but—is that no' somebody in the shop?"

"So it is," said the tobacconist regretfully, although, to be sure, trade was wretched.

He shook hands hurriedly with the children, and guided them to the door. Then he offered his hand, somewhat awkwardly, to the mother.

"Dinna punish him this time," he whispered.

"Oh, but he deserves it. He was rael bad."

"Aw, let him aff this time, if ye please. He'll no' dae it again."

Mrs. Fergus shook her head, smiled faintly, and nodded. After all, she was not given to punishing her children.

"Thank ye," he murmured gratefully, and hastened to attend to the customer.

"That's an awfu' nice man," remarked the little girl on the homeward way. "He gi'ed me a penny."

"Same here," said John.

"Weel, I never!" Mrs. Fergus exclaimed.

"What did he gi'e you, maw?" her son inquired.

"Me!" she laughed. "Naething, of course!"

"Oh!" John considered for a few moments ere he said generously, "I'll gi'e ye a taste o' ma macaroon, maw. Here's the baker's!"

II

On the following Monday afternoon the tobacconist, having nothing more profitable to do, was seated behind his counter, reading his halfpenny morning paper for the second time, when he became possessed by a feeling that he was being watched. Looking over the edge of his paper, he caught a glimpse of a small figure in retreat from the doorway.

"Here!" he called, but got no response.

Presently, however, a small face peeped round the corner.

"Come in," said Mr. Caw in a mild voice.

The small face disappeared.

Mr. Caw sighed, and was about to resume his reading when one half of the small face became visible.

"Come in, laddie, come in."

Very slowly the remainder of the small face came into view, and was followed by the small body of a small boy.

"Is that you, John?"

Halting on the threshold, the small boy grinned in a peculiarly foolish fashion.

"I see it's jist yersel', John," the man said in friendly tones. "I hope yer nice suit was nane the waur o' the scrapin'—eh? . . . Are ye no' comin' in-by?"

John shuffled his feet, but remained dumb, while his grin became, if anything, more foolish. From sheer embarrassment Mr. Caw began to grin also, and continued doing so until he caught sight of his countenance in a mirror which advertised somebody's "prize cigars." He then felt a prize idiot, and might have said something cross, had not a biggish boy, passing along the pavement, given John so violent a push that the youngster was propelled right into the shop.

Clutching at the nearest object for support, the hapless John, to the accompaniment of a fearsome rattle, fell prone beneath an avalanche consisting of Mr. Caw's entire stock of "superior walking sticks."

"Great Jupiter!" ejaculated the tobacconist, hurrying round the counter. "Are ye hurt, laddie?"

John, emerging from the wreckage, rubbing a knee with one hand and the top of his head with the other, glanced at the inquirer's face. Doubtless because he saw no anger there, only concern, he decided, after a sniff or two, not to cry.

"Somebody shoved me," he complained.

"Ay! I seen him," said Mr. Caw, with indignation.

"What was he like? If I catch him, I'll knock the face aff him!"

"Na, na! ye wud never dae a thing like that, John."

"Ay, wud I! If I catch him, I'll——"

The biggish boy peeped round the corner of the doorway.

"Catch me!" he yelled, and, guffawing, disappeared. John looked disconcerted.

"I didna ken he was that big," he murmured.

"Help me to gather up the sticks," said Mr. Caw, as if he had not noticed anything.

Between them they set up the stand and replaced the sticks in it. Then they gazed at each other.

"I helped ye," said John cockily.

"So ye did," Mr. Caw cheerfully admitted.

"I'm gey clever."

"So ye are."

Once more they gazed at each other—the stout, bearded man, the skinny, pale-faced boy.

"I think I'll ha'e to gi'e ye a penny," said Mr. Caw at last.

John grinned expectantly, but said nothing.

"What'll ye buy, if I gi'e ye a penny?"

"A macaroon."

"Aw. . . . Pastry's no' vera guid for wee laddies."

"I like pastry. . . Are ye gaun to gi'e us a penny?"

Mr. Caw went behind the counter and opened the till. He sighed as he slid a coin across the wood.

"There's yer penny, John," he said dejectedly.

John grabbed it and departed.

Mr. Caw sighed again, seated himself, and took up his newspaper. The news, though stale to him, must have been sad, for he sighed repeatedly.

John reappeared.

"I bought chokelet instead," he explained, pushing a halfpenny packet towards the tobacconist. "D'ye like chokelet?" he inquired rather anxiously.

Mr. Caw awkwardly returned the packet with the remark that, while he never touched chocolate, he was extremely obliged to John. Whereupon John, with a bright smile, repossessed himself of the dainty.

Such was the beginning of their friendship. In time John forgot to expect a penny; Mr. Caw forgot that pennies were any consideration to John. The man told stories; the boy listened. The man made tea and toast; the boy shared the meal. Frequently the boy's mother or sister came to take him home.

"He's jist a bother to ye," the mother would say.

"Bother?" Mr. Caw would return; "he's a pleasure!" And he would regard the widow with an eye so kindly that she, having no thoughts of a second husband, became uncomfortable.

As time went on, Mr. Caw grew so bold as to suggest Sunday afternoon excursions on the electric cars. Mrs. Fergus had her misgivings, but gradually he overcame them, and trips were made to the country—once as far as Loch Lomond. Sometimes the man and boy went alone.

"Wee nic-pics," Mr. Caw humorously termed them, and no one could have suspected that he half-starved himself during the week in order to provide for the Sunday feasts. Business was anything but good; the profit derived from keeping the shop open fifteen hours, six days a week, was little more than a labourer's wage.

But a new interest had come into Mr. Caw's existence, and his regular customers began to notice a new cheerfulness in his conversation, a new briskness in his service at the counter. The neighbours, too, began to observe the boy's frequent visits to the shop and the Sunday excursions, and decided that the tobacconist was courting the mother through the son. Further, they agreed that he had little or no chance.

"He's ower auld for her, an' he hasna the siller to tempt her, an' his face is awfu' like a goat's," said a woman who had once been employed to clean the shop at what she considered an insufficient fee. Unfortunately, the last clause of her statement was taken up by her son, who repeated it jeeringly to John, as the latter was about to enter the shop the following afternoon.

John promptly hit out, and a fight ensued, which was ended only by the efforts of the tobacconist.

"I bled his nose, onywey," panted John, while his elderly friend, having conducted him to the living-room, applied butter to a bruise on his forehead.

"But ye shouldna quarrel, laddie. What was it about?"

"He said ye had a face like a goat."

"Aw, did he?" Mr. Caw tried not to look annoyed. He had always been rather proud of his beard. With a feeble smile he inquired:

"Dae *you* think I'm like a goat, John?"

John shook his head emphatically.

Mr. Caw tried not to look delighted.

"Ye're liker a sheep," said John; adding, "It's a nicer beast nor a goat."

Whereupon Mr. Caw, not being entirely without a sense of humour, startled the boy by laughing uproariously.

"Maybe I am liker a sheep, John," he said at last, "but we'll keep that a secret, if ye please. Are ye gaun to tak' yer tea wi' me the nicht?"

"Ay—thenk ye kindly," said John, obeying for once his mother's injunction to remember his "manners" before Mr. Caw.

"I'm vexed I've nae jam the nicht; the pot's empty."

"I'll gang oot an' buy jam for ye," replied the cause of the pot's emptiness, with great promptitude.

"'Deed, I never thocht o' that," returned Mr. Caw, producing one of his hard-earned shillings. "Mind an' dinna fa' wi' the jam."

"No' likely."

During the boy's absence Mr. Caw set out the tea-things.

"Aweel," he reflected, "it maun be a grand thing to ha'e a laddie—even when he is impiddent."

III

On a night in spring, more than a year after his first meeting with the Fergus family, Mr. Caw was thinking of putting up the shutters, when a smartly dressed man of between thirty and forty entered the shop.

"Ah, Mr. Burnside," said the tobacconist, looking pleased, "I was fearin' ye had deserted me."

Mrs. Fergus's lodger laughed pleasantly.

"Been away for a week. When I do desert this locality we must arrange to do our business by post.

I couldn't live happy without that special mixture of yours."

"But—but are ye thinkin' o' leavin' this—this locality?"

Mr. Burnside laughed again.

"Fact is," he said, with elaborate carelessness, "I'm getting married shortly."

"Weel, weel!" said Mr. Caw blankly. Then, as if recollecting himself, he held out his hand. "I'm sure I congratulate ye heartily."

"Thanks! I've just been appointed chief secretary to Music Halls, Limited—an enormous concern, with headquarters in Manchester."

"That's great news! I wish ye every happiness. Eh—does yer intended belong to—to Glasgow? Excuse me askin' sic a question."

"To Edinburgh. We've been engaged for some time, but I thought it better to wait till I managed to hit this off."

"Jist so." Mr. Caw held out his hand once more. "I'm vera pleased indeed to hear yer news, Mr. Burnside."

Mr. Burnside broke a short silence by saying: "I've another bit of news which may interest you—only you must keep your thumb on it. May I ask you whether you have a lease of this shop?"

"A lease? Na, na; I jist tak' it frae year to year. Whiles I think I'd be better to gi'e it up a'thegither."

"I think you should try to get a lease—and a good long one—as soon as possible."

The tobacconist gaped.

"Do you think you could get a lease, Mr. Caw?"

"Easy! Look at the empty shops here! The term's next week——"

"That's lucky!"

"But I canna see——"

Mr. Burnside was not an actor, but he had the dramatic instinct. He pointed across the street.

"D'you see that building exactly opposite?"

"Ay, I see it."

Mr. Burnside's middle finger tapped the counter slowly, impressively.

"In a few months that building will have disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes. . . . In a few months more the site will be covered by a magnificent, up-to-date music-hall. . . . And, my friend, you and I are the only two people at present in Glasgow who have the information. How does it strike you? Better business—eh?—provided, of course, they don't put up your rent. But, if you're quick, you may avoid that for years to come."

"Better business!" muttered Mr. Caw. "Why, sir, it'll be grand business!" he cried. "It'll change the street entirely."

"I thought so," said the other, smiling.

A slight moisture came into the eyes of the elderly man. He was not accustomed to people going out of their way to do him a kindness.

"Man!" he said abruptly, "what made ye tell *me*?"

"There's no reason why one man shouldn't do another man a good turn—especially when it costs nothing," Mr. Burnside lightly replied. "Blame it on the goodness of your special mixture, if you like! Besides, you've been good to that young rascal John and his mother and sister. I don't love John, I can tell you, but his father and I were boys together. His father never had the luck he deserved. Perhaps he ought to have stuck to country life. But that's all in the past. Will you see about that lease? I think your best plan would be to call on your landlord and

complain bitterly of the rent as it stands at present; then suggest a ten years' lease, if he will agree to knock a pound or two off the rent. That should fetch him. Try it. You might also get him to paint the shop. A year hence I'll expect to see you with several assistants. Now give me two ounces of the usual."

Mr. Caw weighed out the mixture and wrapped it up with a shaky hand. "I canna thank ye," was all he said; but he said it several times, the last time in response to his customer's "good night."

IV

With gloomy interest Mr. Caw regarded the building opposite his shop. The building itself was gloomy, being in process of demolition. Until a few hours earlier than this autumn afternoon the tottering, fall and crash of each mass of masonry had been a delight to the tobacconist; his hopes had risen with each cloud of dust. It is a fine thing to have "prospects," even at fifty-three.

Yet having the prospects, one may find that one has no particular use for them. That was how John Caw felt as he watched the destroyers. He was the possessor of a ten years' lease of his shop at a ridiculous rent, as his landlord declared; he was justified in anticipating himself the owner of a flourishing little business; his lean years were all but over. Indeed, his affairs were already improving. And yet he was a miserable man.

"Hullo!" said a young voice suddenly.

Mr. Caw turned from his observation and smiled. The boy had certainly been neglecting him of late. The evenings had been fine—and there were other boys. But the man's regret did not include resentment.

"I'm gled to see ye, John. Are ye for a cup o' tea the nicht?"

"Ay. But I'll ha'e to hurry up. I've to meet Willie Patterson at six."

"Jist that," said Mr. Caw agreeably. "I'll get it ready. Come ben, laddie."

They went into the back room, and the host set about preparing the meal. There was a longish silence.

At last, in what he imagined to be a careless tone of voice, the man remarked:

"I've jist been hearin' that yer mither's thinkin' o' removin' frae this place."

"Ay," the boy answered. "Are they biscuits the sweet sort?"

Mr. Caw nodded. "An' whaur is she thinkin' o' settlin'?"

"Crosshill."

"Oh, Crosshill!" Mr. Caw, with much deliberation, measured the tea from the battered tin to the brown pot. "Crosshill's a lang road frae here," he observed, returning the tin to the mantelshelf. "Is she wearied o' this place, think ye?"

"She's got the promise o' a rale guid lodger, if she tak's a hoose in Crosshill. He's a frien' o' Mr. Burnside's."

"I see. But can she no' get a guid lodger here?" Mr. Caw was well aware that Mrs. Fergus had been doing badly since Mr. Burnside's departure.

"I dinna ken," said John, without much interest. "Is that a new book?" he inquired, pointing at a hanging shelf.

"Ay. It's a' about wild beasts. I got it for yer-sel'. When ye can spare the time, John, I'll read ye some o' the stories."

"I'll come the morn—if it's rainin'."

Mr. Caw could not shake off his depression. Even the boy noticed that something was wrong, and at the end of the meal he said:

"Are ye no' weel?"

Mr. Caw hastily replied that he had never felt better.

"Ye look awfu' sorry," said John.

Just then the tobacconist was called to the receipt of custom. On his return he said:

"I'm maybe feelin' a bit low, John. But we'll no' speak aboot it. Will ye be gled to gang to Crosshill?"

"Aw, I'm no' heedin'."

"I—I'll miss ye, John."

The boy said nothing.

"Of course, I dinna expect you to miss me, though you an' me ha'e been rael guid frien's. . . . But I daursay I'm ower auld a frien' for you. Eh? . . . It's no' to be expectit that you could like me as weel as I like you."

"But I like ye," said John uncomfortably. "It's time I was gaun to meet Willie." He slid from his seat and held out his hand.

"Ye like me?" whispered Mr. Caw, holding it. "'Deed, John, that's guid hearin'. Pit a' the biscuits in yer pooch. . . . I was feart ye had got tired o' yer auld frien'. Ye see, laddie, I like ye rael weel—better nor onybody, I'm thinkin'. . . . Noo, awa' to yer play. I'll no' detain ye."

John hesitated.

"If it was rainin'," he mumbled, "I wud stop till ye read aboot the wild beasts."

"It'll maybe rain the morn," the other said, and conducted the boy to the door.

V

Glasgow folk declared that, for the time of year, they had never seen such a long spell of fine weather.

On the evening of the ninth dry day Mr. Caw, garbed in his Sunday clothes, which he had donned in spasms, due more to the possibility of customers than their actuality, might have been observed locking his door and affixing an envelope to its panel. Nervous handwriting on the envelope proclaimed that the shop would be—

“OPEN SHORTLY.”

A few minutes later he was ringing the bell of Mrs. Fergus's abode.

The widow opened the door. She was surprised to see him on a week-day, but hospitably invited him to enter, leading the way to the parlour, which was still awaiting a lodger.

“Tak’ a sate, Mr. Caw,” she said, wondering uneasily what had brought him.

Mr. Caw seated himself.

“Lovely weather,” he said, with an effort.

“It is that.”

“I hope ye’re weel, Mistress Fergus.”

“Thenk ye, I canna complain.”

“An’ yer lassie?”

“She’s fine, thank ye.”

“An’—an’ John?”

“Oh, John’s oot as usual. He’s fine. I doobt he’s a bother to ye, Mr. Caw.”

“He hasna been near me for a week. But he’s never a bother. He’s a clever laddie,” continued Mr. Caw jerkily. “Ye’ll be rael prood o’ him yet.”

Mrs. Fergus smiled.

"John's like ither weans—whiles bad and whiles guid—but I doobt he's no' clever. He hasna been lang at the schule."

"Ah, but he's clever! Some day ye'll be for sendin' him to the University to be a doctor or, maybe, a meenister."

The woman's smile became tinged with bitterness.

"I'll be sendin' him oot to earn his livin' as soon as the law'll let me."

Mr. Caw, gazing at his highly polished boots, forgot that they pinched.

"I never seen a mair intelligent boy," he said, in a low voice. "When I read stories to him he misses naething—an' ye should hear the questions he asks. Oh, I think John should get a chance when he grows up a bit."

"An' d'ye think I wudna gi'e John a chance—if I could, Mr. Caw?"

"I ask yer pardon, Mistress Fergus. I—I'm no' clever at expressin' ma feelin's."

Mr. Caw, leaning forward, pressed his clasped hands between his knees. His beard, which he had recently trimmed, wagged; but no sound came from his lips.

Mrs. Fergus reddened and looked miserable.

"I'm no' offended, Mr. Caw," she murmured, "but, if ye please, we'll no' speak about it."

The man pulled himself together and spoke in a hoarse whisper, the words tumbling over one another.

"Mistress Fergus, I maun speak! Things is lookin' weel for me in the future; things is already improvin'. If—if ye'll marry me, I—I'll dae ma best for you an'—an' yer bairns."

"Oh, na, na!" she cried. "I couldna marry onybody."

And there was a dead silence.

"Could ye no' conseeder it?" he urged at last. "I'm awfu' easy pleased."

She shook her head and put her hands to her face.

Mr. Caw got up and walked unevenly to the door, where he halted.

"Thenk ye for no' laughin' at me," he said gently, and went out.

On his way to the shop he met the boy.

"Hullo!" said John.

"Weel, laddie. Ha'e ye been enjoyin' yersel'?"

"Fine!"

"Are ye gaun hame noo?"

"It's no' late yet. What wey did ye shut yer shop? I was comin' to hear a story."

"Was ye? Will ye come noo?"

"Ay." The boy put his hand into the man's. The next moment he would have withdrawn it, lest any of his fellows should see and chaff him; but the man's grasp tightened.

"John, I wish ye wasna gaun to leave me."

"I wish I wasna."

"Dae ye?"

"Ay, I dae! I wish maw could get a guid lodger here."

Mr. Caw dropped the young hand.

"John," he said, "there's a penny. Rin an' buy what ye like, an' wait for me at the shop."

On opening the door for the second time, Mrs. Fergus gave a gasp.

"Will ye ha'e me for a lodger?" panted Mr. Caw. "I'll be oot a' day, an' I can eat onything."

"Oh, but, Mr. Caw——"

"I ken what ye're thinkin'," he said rapidly. "But ye micht try to forget what I said a wee while back. I—I'll no' say I didna mean it. But I'll never re-

peat it. It—it's deeficult to explain. I've a—a great regaird for ye, Mistress Fergus—a great regaird—but I culdna think to loss John. I—I wud dae onything afore I wud loss John. . . . D'ye see?" He paused, and continued: "I was certain ye wudna accep' me, but—I was kin' o' desperate. D'ye understand? . . . Dinna tak' John awa' frae me. Ha'e me for yer lodger, in Mr. Burnside's place, an' then ye'll no' ha'e to remove."

His anxiety was pitiful.

Suddenly Mrs. Fergus laughed.

"Oh, I'm no' laughin' at you, Mr. Caw," she said. "I'm laughin' at masel'. . . . But it's an awfu' relief!"

"What's a relief, mistress?"

"Ah, weel, I think we best no' speak about it."

"But ye'll gi'e me a chance to be yer lodger! Jist mention yer terms, an'——"

"Mr. Caw," said the woman seriously, "ye've a big, warm heart. But think it ower for twa-three days."

"But I want to tell John. He's waitin' at the shop for me," he pleaded.

Mrs. Fergus considered.

"If ye're o' the same mind the morn, I'll be gled to hear frae ye, Mr. Caw."

Mr. Caw went down the stone stairs like a young man.

Presently he came to his shop, where John was waiting, his mouth full.

"Laddie, hoo wud ye like if I was yer mither's lodger an' bided in your hoose?"

"That wud be nae fun," said John, with frank dismay. "I like comin' to the shop best. Are ye gaun to be oor lodger?"

"No' if ye dinna want me." The tobacconist opened the door and led the way into the darkish shop. "Ye

can come here every day," he added. He picked up a box of matches, but delayed striking a light.

"John," he said, a little huskily. "Dae ye no' like me weel enough to hae me in yer hoose? Wud ye rather gang awa' an' never see me again? Eh, laddie?"

John did not answer, but all of a sudden he clutched the man's hand and pressed his face against the man's sleeve.

XVI

THE UGLY UNCLE

I

IN these days it would seem to be almost inevitable that a teller of tales should allow his most unpleasing personage at least one redeeming feature. Whether such generosity springs from charity, or is but one of the conventions of a too-anxious-to-please age, matters little—no more, indeed, than whether the redeeming feature itself consists of a pair of eyes of peculiar charm, or a rare smile that lightens up and transforms the whole unlovely visage. The present teller frankly admits that he did his best to discover something attractive in the countenance of Mr. Godfrey Robb, and it is with reluctance that he records the complete failure of his investigations.

Mr. Godfrey Robb must have been born ugly—one does hear of beautiful babies—and time and himself had done their worst. His was neither a fearsome nor a repulsive ugliness—rather was it that miserable, undistinguished sort which evokes far more contempt than pity. At fifty he was the possessor of a semi-bald head, over-grown eyebrows, little muddy blue eyes, a lump of a nose with a reddish tip, a sour-looking mouth, and a quantity of untidy, grizzled whiskers and beard. Moreover, he was disposed towards obesity.

He was a bachelor—which is not saying that he could not have found a wife had he tried. He was not

so ugly as all that. He dwelt with his sister, his senior by a few years, in a pretty villa situated on a hillside overlooking an unimportant country town. He had retired from a fairly successful business at the age of thirty-two, with the help of a legacy, and with the idea of becoming an author. It would be grossly unfair to infer that this idea constituted his whole stock-in-trade, simply because he never got beyond the title of his first book. We do not know how he may have wrestled and struggled in the privacy of that comfortable room still known as the "study." To be sure, poverty was not present to prod him on; yet surely ambition must have beckoned, for a season at least. But to the naturally sluggish man who does not need to work, what enemy is there like Ease?

The cosy lounge-chair, the luxurious couch, the pleasant pipe or cigar—these were his; also the books of other authors, which, however, he neglected more and more as the placid years slid past. In an amazingly short space of time Godfrey Robb became a confirmed sluggard. His sister grieved in secret, but did not attempt to interfere. She was industrious in many ways, a slave to the petty duties of life. Ere long she ceased to deem it "awful" that her brother should be content to spend the hours between breakfast and early dinner in his chair, with nought to occupy his attention save the morning paper and his pipe. She accepted it as a matter of course that he should doze on the couch throughout the afternoon, and she would probably have been alarmed had he failed, at seven p.m., to leave the house in order to spend a couple of hours in the smoke-room of the Stag Hotel, where, in the company of acquaintances, he drank—not more than he could carry, but more, certainly, than healthful for a man of his inactivity. Well, it was life so far as he knew it. He neither

wished nor did any one any harm, and he did nobody or himself any good.

On an afternoon in early June he drowsed as usual on the couch. The atmosphere of the study was stale and stuffy, for it had not occurred to him to open the window. He was entirely comfortable and at peace with all the world.

The entrance of the elderly servant, an almost unprecedented event during the sacred hour of siesta, might have been part of his hazy dream, so little did it disturb him.

"What is it?" he mumbled.

"A telegram, sir!" cried the servant, who was in a high state of excitement. Mr. Robb had not received a telegram within her recollection, and her length of service under his sister exceeded ten years.

Godfrey grunted and sat up. He felt annoyed with his sister, who, he was sure, had sent the telegram. She might have delayed its despatch a couple of hours. Miss Robb had travelled to London the previous day to bid adieu to her youngest sister, who, with her husband, was about to depart on a long sea voyage for the benefit of the latter's health.

"Putting off her return till to-morrow, I suppose," Mr. Robb muttered, clumsily rending the envelope. Blinking, he read the message:

"Coming home this afternoon. Bringing Charlie. Prepare spare room. Elizabeth."

Mr. Robb stared. "Who the mischief is Charlie?" he stammered. Then he handed the message to the servant. "Make what you can of it. The train is due at six, I believe. That's all."

The servant went out, and he lay down again. But slumber did not return.

"Who the mischief is Charlie?"

II

It never occurred to him to go to meet his sister at the station, and not until she called to him from the hall did he leave his couch, prepared to growl at having had to wait for tea a whole hour beyond the proper time.

He opened the door and stood there—a frowsy, undignified figure of middle age. “Well?” he demanded sulkily.

Miss Robb, whose excessive primness rendered her plainer than she might otherwise have been, moved to one side, disclosing a little boy, who appeared to have already discovered something to interest him in the garden, for he was standing, sailor hat in hand, gazing through the doorway by which he had lately entered. At the sight of him the man drew back a pace.

“What the mischief——” he began, and the boy looked round.

“He is Mary’s son,” said Miss Robb. “He has come to stay with us for a few weeks. I’ll explain afterwards.” She turned to the boy. “Charlie, go forward and shake hands with your Uncle Godfrey.”

The little boy advanced obediently, but half-way to the study door he halted. He had never seen a person so odd-looking as this uncle of whom he had scarcely even heard.

Mr. Robb did not move, and there was an uncomfortable silence till the lady said, somewhat impatiently: “Come, come child! shake hands with your Uncle Godfrey.”

Astonishment rather than fear had caused the halt, and once more Charlie advanced.

His small hand was awkwardly accepted by a large and flabby one, and retained for a mere instant.

Mr. Robb gave a sort of grunt, which may have

been what Charlie expected, for the boy smiled and looked up frankly at the hairy countenance.

"H'm! How are you?" said the man, with an effort.

"Quite well, thank you, and how are you?"

Whether Mr. Robb would have replied to the genial inquiry is doubtful. His sister's interposition relieved him from any necessity for further conversation.

"Come now, Charlie, and make yourself tidy for tea," she said, taking his hand.

The boy turned reluctantly. He had caught sight of a quaint clock on the study mantelpiece, which he would fain have inspected at closer quarters.

"Tell what's-her-name to bring my tea here," said Mr. Robb, and closed the door.

As Charlie went upstairs with his aunt he put the question: "But why did he make a face at me all the time?"

"His face is as God made it," she replied, with cold gravity.

"But not the whiskers," said Charlie with conviction.

"Hush!" Miss Robb was shocked. "Here is your room," she went on presently. "I hope you will be comfortable and orderly. Sarah is bringing up your box. She will help you, if you ask her politely."

It was not Miss Robb's fault that the boy, left to himself, was overcome by a sudden sense of loneliness, that the sunny garden beneath his window became blurred to his sight. She was doing her best. Her knowledge of children was confirmed to their capacity for mischief. It is true that she was deeply interested in certain little black savages half the world away; but it was their souls rather than their hearts that gave her concern. In placing Charlie in charge of the elderly servant, Sarah, a pious and wholly

stolid person, she was not conscious of shirking any responsibilities. On the contrary, the arrangement involved additions to her own household labours, already manifold, the villa being her secular temple, so to speak.

And when Charlie came to the tea-table, a very subdued and silent little fellow compared with her travelling companion of the afternoon, her only sensation was one of relief, for she had dreaded noisy talk and unseemly behaviour. But his young spirit was chilled for the time being—his young body tired. So when the sombre meal was over, he took both to bed without demur, and there, happily, the weariness of the flesh soon had its way.

At half past nine, as was his wont, Mr. Robb returned from the Stag Hotel for supper, and his sister took the opportunity to explain the boy's arrival.

"He was to have stayed with the Richardsons during his parents' absence—it was all arranged—but at the last moment Mary had a message saying that the Richardson children had taken measles. I could hardly have refused when Mary asked me to take him until the Richardsons were clear of infection. That means weeks, I understand." Miss Robb sighed, and took a sip of extremely weak tea.

Mr. Robb, his mouth full of Welsh-rarebit, merely grunted.

"I hope he may be well-behaved, and not make a mess of the house and garden and break my good things," she continued.

"I hope he won't make a noise," her brother remarked, after clearing his utterance with a copious draught of stout. "If he could break some of your drawing-room trash quietly 'twould be a good riddance."

Miss Robb swallowed her indignation at this rude

reference to her countless beloved knick-knacks, whose dusting occupied her about five hours every Tuesday, summer and winter.

"I shall forbid him to enter the drawing-room," she said, almost calmly. "And, of course, he will put on his slippers before he enters any room."

Mr. Robb grunted again, and applied himself to what remained of the Welsh-rarebit.

"I suppose," said his sister, with some asperity, "I need not reckon on any assistance from you during his stay."

To this remark she received a look which said as plainly as words: "What the mischief do you take me for?"

III

Charlie woke betimes renewed in the joy of living. The sun shone, and when he looked down on the garden he smiled a smile of anticipation. He was accustomed to receive a little help in his dressing, but, after opening his door and listening for a minute or so, he decided to go ahead with the operation single-handed. What he could not do he cheerfully left undone. There were several quite impossible buttons, including the one on the right wrist of his small shirt. What did they matter?

As he went downstairs he heard sounds in the kitchen, and also saw that the front door stood open. Had he been at home he would have visited the kitchen for something to eat, but he doubted his reception there, and went straight—and perhaps stealthily—to the garden. The profusion of flowers appealed to him more than the evidences of the abundant attention bestowed upon the plots. The Robbs were no gardeners themselves, but Miss Robb, who desired

orderliness everywhere, did not grudge the price of hired labour on this half-acre of ground, though, as a matter of fact, she preferred her drawing-room to any garden in the land.

It was not long ere Charlie, to his high satisfaction, came upon a trowel plunged in the soil. Withdrawing it gladly, he looked around for a place to dig. This was not so easy to find; but at last, at the bottom of the garden, he discovered a spot that had not, apparently, been planted with anything. Squatting, he began to make a hole which in time would have a tunnel from it to another hole. Charlie was a town-bred boy, but his summer stays at the coast and in the country had developed a taste for such work as now lay before him. He was warming to his task when hurried footsteps caused him to pause and turn his head.

It was Sarah, but he was now so buoyantly happy that he smiled at her, saying: "You see, I'm going to make a deep pit and then——"

"You mustn't do that," panted Sarah.

His face fell—he assured her that there was nothing to harm where he was working.

"You'll dirty your clothes," she said.

His smile came back. "Oh, that doesn't matter. It's only my old jersey, and——"

"Your aunt says you mustn't touch the garden, Master Charlie, and you'd better come in now; your porridge is ready."

"Am—am I not to get digging anywhere at all?"

"That's it. Now come along and have your porridge. You'd better give it to me." She indicated the trowel.

He surrendered it quietly, then he turned away. "I—I don't care for p-porridge, thank you."

"What! Not like porridge!" exclaimed Sarah, who

would have resigned her situation rather than eat the stuff. Her annoyance, however, was excusable, seeing that she had been put to some extra trouble that morning to make the porridge. "But all little boys ought to like porridge." (O Wisdom, what absurdities are uttered by our elders in thy name!) "Your aunt will be displeased," she went on. "Mind, you mustn't touch anything in the garden." Suddenly she remembered her kitchen duties, and, admonishing him to come indoors the moment he heard the bell, hurried back to the house.

When her footsteps had ceased to sound on his ear, Charlie wiped his eyes on his jersey-sleeve—he had forgotten his handkerchief. Then he turned from the scene of his too brief labours, and walked slowly up the garden. In a shady spot he encountered a belated frog, which interested him ere it disappeared among some heavy growth. Later, he spent a little while watching a bee take his toll from a cluster of pink blossoms; but the bee also disappeared. There were many things to see in this beautiful garden, but there was nothing for him to *do*. He was feeling very lonesome and disconsolate when the breakfast-bell rang.

On his entrance to the house his aunt met him, and cried out in horror at his earthy slippers. He ought not to have gone out in them. He must change them for his clean shoes at once. While he made his change, she told him a few of the things he must not do in the future. Thereafter she witnessed him wash his hands, and then they went into the dining-room.

Mr. Robb was already at table, devouring hot toast and fried fish. He took no notice of the boy beyond emitting a grunt when the former in response to his aunt's command, said dutifully: "Good morning, Uncle Godfrey."

Miss Robb took her seat, and, after giving her

brother a pointed look, which he ignored, said grace in an austere voice. Charlie, balancing himself on highly polished, unyielding leather, closed his eyes and prayed God to take away the plate of porridge set before him. But when he opened his eyes the porridge was still there, and he perceived that there was a thick, shiny skin on its surface.

He glanced at his aunt, hesitated, and took up his spoon, then hesitated once more.

"Come, eat your porridge, Charlie," she said, not unkindly. "You know you ought to have come in for it when Sarah first called you."

Charlie touched the porridge with his spoon. But how can a little boy eat porridge with a big, sore lump in his throat?

"Don't you like porridge?" his aunt inquired.

He shook his head.

She looked her surprise. "Don't you have it every morning at home?"

He shook his head again. "Home!"—he bit his lip at the thought.

"Well, it is very good for you," she went on. "All little boys ought to like porridge. Eat it before it gets cold. I cannot have good food——"

She was going to say "wasted," when her brother rose clumsily from his place, picked up the plate of porridge, and carried it to the sideboard. Ere she could protest, he was back in his place, and presenting the boy with a slice of buttered toast.

"Like fish?" he demanded abruptly.

Charlie's wet gaze of gratitude was short-lived. Bristling with dignity, his aunt rose, marched to the sideboard, and, returning with the porridge, replaced it before him. She said:

"Godfrey, I will not have you interfere. Charlie, eat up your porridge!" and went back to her seat.

There was an uncomfortable silence, broken at last by a half-suppressed sob from the boy.

Something like a grin appeared on Mr. Robb's countenance. With a grunt he got to his feet, and possessed himself of the offending nourishment. With another grunt, he stepped deliberately to the open window, and flung it forth, plate and all. His sister sat still, stupified. He came back to his place, helped Charlie to a goodly portion of fish, and told him, shortly, to "go ahead."

Miss Robb recovered her voice if not her wits. "Do you think I will endure such treatment in my own house?"

"It's my house," he answered bluntly.

Whereupon she got up and left the room.

Mr. Robb got up also and went to the window. "Go ahead!" he said over his shoulder, "or your fish'll be cold, too."

It cannot be said that Charlie enjoyed his breakfast, but, being hungry, he ate what was before him and finished his mug of milk. He wished his uncle would say something, and at last he ventured to remark to the silent figure at the window:

"I expect the dicky-birds will like it," he said softly, diffidently.

With a grunt that might have meant assent or the reverse, the figure turned. "Had enough?" it asked.

"Yes, thank you. It—it was very nice fish, Uncle Godfrey."

"Humph!" muttered Uncle Godfrey, and went off to his study.

Charlie moved to the window, and remained there until Sarah appeared to clear away. He summoned courage and inquired:

"Where can I play, please?"

Sarah, taken aback by the novel question, referred him to his aunt.

Meanwhile, in the study Miss Robb was having an interview with her brother. For twenty years at least he had not interfered with her in any way—she had been sole director of all the household arrangements. Now she poured forth a torrent of protests.

He affected to read the morning paper until the torrent had spent itself. Then he said coolly: "You seem to have porridge on the brain, Elizabeth. It's not the only food. Find out what he likes, and give him it. Also find out what he wants to do, and let him do it."

"Do you wish to quarrel——"

"That is precisely what I don't wish to do. Now kindly go away."

She went—there was nothing else for it. She had had no practice in argument with Godfrey.

It is to her credit that she did not permit resentment to affect her future dealings with the boy. She provided the food he preferred, which, after all, was with few exceptions after her own ideas. She could not, however, obey her brother's second injunction. Death before dirt and disorder might have been her motto. Between her and Sarah, Charlie was subjected to an intermittent bombardment of "don'ts."

It was rather a dull life for a little boy. After breakfast his aunt, if she were not too busy, read him pious, old-fashioned tales until eleven o'clock, when he accompanied her on her marketing to the sleepy town in the valley. On their return he was permitted, in fine weather, to walk round the garden, after promising not to touch anything. Then came dinner, as solemn as the other meals. His uncle occasionally glanced at him, but rarely spoke.

The fine afternoons—the wet ones were too dismal

to record—held more attraction than might have been expected. Sometimes his aunt, sometimes Sarah, conducted him to an unfrequented pine-wood near the house, and while his guardian sat and sewed, or read an improving work, he would be left pretty much to his own resources, and the “don’ts” would almost cease from troubling.

At the foot of a tall pine on the edge of a clearing he set about building a “house” of twigs and moss and cones and stray pebbles. In the beginning, he made friendly requests for assistance—chiefly for companionship’s sake—but neither Miss Robb nor Sarah seemed to understand that the matter in hand was serious in its intention; and when he informed them that a frog would be eager to reside in the house as soon as completed, their gloomy scepticism wounded his feelings, and put an end to his gentle invitations.

But he wrought, happily enough, by himself, and day by day the “house” became more elaborate in construction, more extensive in accommodation. This was, indeed, the treat of the day, and it must be confessed that the hour for going home often found him rebellious. Yet when Miss Robb once threatened to come no more to the wood, his grief was so intense that she recanted hastily, and merely pleaded with him to be more obedient in future.

So the weeks passed away, and in their course doubtless many a little boy had much less to be thankful for than Charlie.

IV

It was the custom of Miss Robb to spend every Thursday evening at the meeting of a missionary circle which met in a friend’s drawing-room. A number of ladies drank tea together, and afterwards en-

gaged in sewing articles which were sold at periodic sales of work in aid of a certain overseas mission. Miss Robb had not missed a meeting for many years, and there was no reason why Charlie's visit should interfere with her attendance. Sarah was always at hand should the boy require attention between the hours of five and nine.

On the fifth Thursday of his stay, Sarah had seen him to bed as usual, and read him sundry Old Testament verses which she herself did not half comprehend, and was about to bid him good night, adding the usual warning not to put the clothes over his head unless he wanted to be suffocated to death.

"I wish you would tell my Uncle Godfrey to come."

Sarah, greatly astonished, demurred. She was one of those people who seem to believe that if a thing hasn't happened before, it ought never to happen at all.

But Charlie persisted, and at last, remarking that Mr. Robb would be going out immediately, she went downstairs with the request.

Mr. Robb was lifting his hat from the stand, and was so taken aback that he let it fall. Presently he went slowly upstairs.

In the doorway he halted. "What is it?" he asked uneasily.

"Please come in, Uncle Godfrey. Come near!"

Mr. Robb shuffled forward. "I was feeling a little lonely," the boy went on. "I would like very much if you would sing me a small song, Uncle Godfrey."

"God bless me!"

"And everybody," supplemented Charlie. "But you can say your prayers afterwards. I would like a song about a frog, because a frog is going to live in the house I've built in the wood, when it's finished, you know. It's nearly finished now."

"Oh, is it?"

"Yes. Now sing a song."

"But—but I can't sing songs," Mr. Robb stammered.

"Not even the one about a froggie would a-woosing go?"

Mr. Robb shook his head. "I can't."

Charlie's face clouded, then lightened. "Well, tell me a story instead." He looked up expectant.

"I can't tell stories," said Mr. Robb, feeling as though a rusted door were being prised open somewhere.

"Oh, surely you can tell *some* stories! I don't mind if they're not very good, Uncle Godfrey. Please try."

Once more the uncomely head wagged refusal.

"Did no one tell you stories and sing songs when you were a little boy?"

"I suppose so," admitted Mr. Robb, with a grunt, "but I don't remember any—just now." The last two words were inaudible.

"Oh, perhaps if you waited and thought, you would remember one." Poor Charlie! He did not want to be left alone that evening.

"No, I couldn't. Perhaps"—the man hesitated—"another time. Now you ought to sleep." He turned towards the door.

"But stay—stay and talk about—things."

"I'm no good at talking."

Charlie's mouth quivered, but he made one more effort. "Would you—would you not like me to tell you about the house I am building in the woods?"

"Well," began Mr. Robb, and paused. "Yes," he concluded, in a shamefaced manner.

The young face became wreathed in smiles. "Please sit down, and I'll tell you all about it, Uncle Godfrey."

Uncle Godfrey awkwardly took a chair at the window, and grunted.

"Please come nearer—come quite near. Nearer yet. Yes, that's nice and near."

Then Charlie began. He talked for half an hour—talked till his voice sounded sleepy, till his eyes blinked.

"Would you like to come and see the house, Uncle Godfrey?" he asked at last, lying back and slipping under the clothes.

The man nodded.

"Shall I take you to-morrow?"

"All right!" The tone was a trifle gruff. "Will you sleep now?"

"Yes."

The man rose slowly—was it reluctantly?

"Smooth my pillow and tuck me in," said Charlie.

Mr. Robb went scarlet, but did his best to obey orders. The touch of the boy's hair gave him a queer feeling. He grunted a good night.

"A kiss!" said Charlie.

Mr. Robb stared and glanced round him. Then, for an instant, he bent over the lad. Then he went quickly from the room and downstairs, looking as though he had seen a ghost.

At the hotel that night, they thought him even duller than usual.

V

Charlie never quite finished his house in the wood, nor did he take his Uncle Godfrey to view it. The morning after their conversation the weather broke—the wind and rain lasted for three days. And on the fourth day it was time for Charlie to go to his London relations, who had taken a house at the coast.

Under his aunt's escort, he went gladly in the train to the home where there were other children, and grown ups who understood. He was far too excited

when he bade a hasty good-bye to his Uncle Godfrey to notice the latter slip a sovereign into the pocket of his sailor suit. And his uncle said nothing at all—didn't even grunt.

The summer passed, the autumn came. On a Thursday evening in September, afraid of being late for her circle meeting, Miss Robb was hastening through the pine-wood, which happened to supply a short cut to her friend's house. She remembered that she had not been in the wood since her nephew's visit. From the beaten path she looked between the trees in the direction of the favourite clearing. The air was mild and still, but there had been a brisk gale during the previous night.

Of a sudden Miss Robb came to a standstill. There was some one in the clearing—some one she knew.

An uncouth figure was kneeling at the foot of a tall pine. With patient, careful hands that seemed to have had considerable practice, it was methodically repairing the "house" which had suffered damage from the gale. Now and then it grunted.

Miss Robb stumbled to the nearest tree, and, leaning against it, fumbled for her handkerchief.

XVII

THE LITTLE TYRANT

MRS. JACKSON leaned from the window of the railway carriage and smiled upon her husband and child. "Now, baby," she said playfully, "take care of daddy till mother comes home." Baby showed two tiny teeth, remarking, "Ah!" several times, after which he said "Bah!" as if he meant it.

"Remember, Lucy," said Mr. Jackson, "that the last train on Saturday for this part of the world leaves town at six-five. For heaven's sake, don't miss it!"

"When did I ever miss a train?" cried Mrs. Jackson. "Wave handy, baby!"

The husband refrained from enumerating the trains missed, to his own confusion, by his charming wife.

"Besides, I've my lovely birthday watch, Billy," she continued sweetly. "It is bound to keep me right, for I'm always looking at it! And—oh, by the bye, as soon as you get back to the cottage, give baby to Jane. Jane promised to be ready to take him a walk. And she has some nice cold tongue for your lunch. Don't let baby worry you, but if you can, take him with you on the grass for half an hour in the afternoon, it will allow Jane to—— Oh, goodness, the train is starting! Ta-ta, baby! Tell Jane to mix some fresh mustard. Wave handy to mother! Ta-ta, darling. There are pickles in the sideboard . . ."

Mrs. Jackson said much more, but it only reached the ears of the porter who was standing further up the platform. By the time she had discovered her

handkerchief to wave to her loved ones, the train was in the tunnel.

Mr. Jackson, shouldering his son and heir, left the little wayside station and bent his steps in the direction of the cottage which he had rented for August. It was beautifully situated, but lonely, the village after which the station was named being two miles distant, and the stationmaster's house the only other dwelling in the near neighbourhood. But the Jacksons enjoyed the solitude. Mr. Jackson had been overworked in the city for nearly two years.

Chattering merrily to the infant, Mr. Jackson entered the porch. Although he had taken Saturday "off," he had a parcel of business books to look over before he returned to town early on Monday morning, and he therefore decided to place baby in Jane's charge at once, and get his task done by lunch-time.

"Jane!"

There was no answer.

"Jane!" he called again.

A groan came from the direction of the kitchen. Thither he went without delay, and discovered the maid sitting on the scullery floor in a peculiar attitude, her face very white.

"Good gracious! What's the matter?"

"Please, sir, I—I fell off a chair and I've hurt my foot, and I can't get up. I think it's my ankle."

"Hard lines!" said Mr. Jackson, sympathetically. "Wait, and I'll help you."

He hurried into the sitting-room and set baby on the floor, propping him round with the sofa cushions. Baby began to cry lustily.

"Back in a minute, old man," said baby's father, and returned to the kitchen. "Now, Jane." He attempted to raise her.

Jane let out a scream. It was clearly a severe sprain.

"Holy Moses!" muttered Mr. Jackson, "this is awful! I'll be back in a minute," he said aloud.

Baby was howling his best. Jackson picked up the child and hurried down to the station.

The stationmaster willingly offered his help, and ten minutes later they had placed the sufferer on her bed, while baby waked all the echoes of the sitting-room.

"I'm sorry my wife went away in the same train as your lady," said the stationmaster.

"I'm sorry too, but we must do our best. I wish I knew something about sprains," said Jackson.

"The porter might do something. I'll whistle him up. He once attended the ambulance class."

The porter came, eager to be of service, but the modest Jane declared she would rather have her foot cut off than be touched by a strange young man. No persuasion could induce her to change her mind, and at last Jackson, who may be forgiven a muttered swear, dismissed the porter with an apology and a shilling.

"Come into the parlour," he said to the stationmaster. "The little boy does not like being left to himself. . . . Well, I suppose it's necessary to have a doctor. Where is the nearest?"

"Ingleton, sir. Seven miles. I can send him a wire from the station; he has a motor cycle."

"That's better," said Jackson. "A thousand thanks for your help."

"Right, sir," said the friendly stationmaster. "You don't wish to wire to Mrs. Jackson?"

Jackson hesitated. "No," he said at last. "No use spoiling her day by bringing her back early. I'll manage somehow. The boy ought to be taking a nap shortly."

The stationmaster departed, proffering any further aid that might be required, and Jackson, after telling

the maid, kindly enough, that the doctor was coming, sat down with his son on his knee at the parlour window. Baby was disposed to be unreasonable. He now desired to sit on the floor; soon after being placed there he demanded to be taken up. This happened many times.

"I suppose it's another tooth coming," the father reflected, as he wiped his brow. The weather was exceedingly warm.

Presently baby began to wail bitterly.

"Mr. Jackson!"

"Good Lord! what next?" Billy groaned, and went to the maid's door.

"I think baby is hungry," said the girl. "I made up his food just before I fell. It's in a little pan on the kitchen table, and it has just got to be warmed and put in his bottle. Mrs. Jackson has been trying him with a spoon, but you'll be safer with the bottle, sir."

"Thanks. I'd forgotten all about his food. How often does he get fed?"

"Every three hours, sir."

"Oh, Christmas!" muttered Jackson, as he turned towards the kitchen.

Baby had barely settled down to his meal when the doctor arrived. He was an elderly bachelor, and did not hide his amusement at Jackson's predicament.

"How are you going to manage?" he asked, after he had attended to Jane. "When does Mrs. Jackson return?"

"About eight o'clock."

"And it's now eleven-thirty. You might get some one from the village, though the annual fair is on. If I can do anything——"

"Thanks, doctor, but I'll manage somehow till my wife comes home."

"Brave man! I'll look in to-morrow."

The doctor took his leave, and shortly afterwards baby drained his bottle.

"Now, old man, you're going to have a nice nap," said Jackson, cheerfully, as baby rubbed his eyes.

Baby cried sleepily for twenty minutes or so, but did not slumber.

"Aha!" said Jackson, with an inspiration, "you want that black doll thing to chew. I wonder where it is. Better ask Jane."

"Missus likes it to be boiled every morning, sir, and I left it on the hob just afore I fell," said Jane.

Jackson made for the kitchen, and was met by an appalling smell. There was a pan on the range which contained a horrible, evil-fuming mess. The pan had evidently boiled dry. Jackson pitched it out of the window.

"Missus had another one, but I don't know where it is," said Jane, weeping with sympathy.

After a frantic search among his wife's belongings he discovered the desired article in a box labelled "Voice Jujubes." He presented it to baby, and baby gave a sigh of satisfaction and fell sound asleep. Jackson laid the child in the cot, gave a weary glance at the floor strewn with contents of drawers, and left the room. It was now too late to send a wire summoning his wife by the afternoon train, otherwise he would have sent it.

He supplied Jane with nourishment, and took a little himself. He relit the kitchen fire, which had gone out, and did something which caused the smoke to come forth in clouds. Jane screeched instructions, and the household was saved from suffocation. Then he made up two bottles for baby, according to Jane's directions. That done, he sat down to get cool. Baby allowed him exactly five minutes to do so.

"He'll stop crying," said Jane, on being appealed to, half an hour later, "if you take him out in his pram, sir. He usually goes out now, and comes in for a bottle at three, and then goes out again till bedtime. He gets his bath at six."

"He'll have to wait till his mother comes home," said Jackson shortly.

But the outing cheered him up. Baby was as merry as could be, and only cried when his father objected to his watch being thrown on the road. The three o'clock meal was duly consumed, and the afternoon passed happily till baby got sleepy.

"Good biz!" said Jackson to himself. "I'll give him the other bottle now, and he'll sleep till Lucy comes back."

Baby went to sleep readily enough, and Jackson made tea for the maid and himself. Afterwards he lit his pipe and sat down in the porch with a novel, to while away the time till eight o'clock. He had not managed so badly, he reflected, and he looked forward, not without pride, to relating the day's adventure to Lucy.

At six-thirty he took in the milk, and felt better pleased with himself than ever. At six-forty the stationmaster appeared with a telegram.

"Fearfully sorry. Missed train. Staying with mother. Hope you will manage till Monday morning. Love. Lucy."

"This," said Mr. Jackson, with a great effort to speak calmly, "is rather a crusher. My wife can't be here till Monday."

The stationmaster, however, was determined to be helpful.

"Well, sir," he said, "there's a train passes here

about noon on Sunday, and I believe they would stop it——”

“You’re a friend in need!” exclaimed Jackson; “I’ll write out a wire at once.” And he did so, explaining the situation pretty fully.

“How do you think you’ll get along to-night, sir?” inquired the sympathetic official.

“Oh, I suppose I’ll manage somehow,” said Jackson, with an attempt at a laugh. “The doctor is coming to-morrow, and if he finds me dead or dotty, I’ve no doubt he’ll inform you. I don’t suppose you know a woman who is willing to come and tidy up things to-night—at her own price—and come again in the morning?”

“The porter is going to the village now, and I’ll tell him to do his best. But it’s the fair, you know, and——”

“He can try, anyway. Thank you.”

“No thanks required, sir. Good evening, and good luck to you.”

Nothing occurred till nine o’clock, when the porter called to declare his errand fruitless.

“Can’t be helped,” said Jackson to himself, with a sigh. “Must manage somehow. Better concoct more bottles, I suppose. But how the dickens I’m going to bathe the boy I don’t know.” He went into the kitchen, washed some dishes and broke others.

Billy Jackson was a mild-tempered man, but for once his wrath had been roused against his helpmate.

“Why on earth couldn’t she have caught the train?” he muttered. “When women get cackling with their relations, they wouldn’t notice the last trump.”

.

At nine-thirty he lifted the child from the cot, intending to undress him. But his courage failed.

"I daresay I could take his clothes off, but I'd never get them on again. Don't cry, old man. I'll do what I can for you, but you'll have to do without your bath to-night and sleep in your clothes."

He paid the little one certain necessary attentions, clumsily, no doubt, but tenderly. Baby cried drearily.

"Cheer up, old man. Have a bottle. What? Not thirsty—I mean hungry? All right, there's no hurry. Sorry to annoy you."

Baby continued crying.

"Want your mother? Eh? I suppose that's it. Thought she might have made sure of the train, for your sake! Have a drink, now? No? Perhaps I had better consult Jane."

He found Jane moaning with a severe headache, and procured her a couple of tabloids.

"If you hush him, sir, he'll drop off, I think," said the girl. "And when he's almost asleep he'll take his bottle, and then he'll sleep all night. I wish I could help you, sir, I do, indeed."

"Don't worry. Try to go to sleep. But—er—how do you hush him exactly?"

"Sing to him, sir. Not loud, sir."

"Oh, I see," he said, rather doubtfully. "Well, good night. I expect your mistress will be back to-morrow. Is there anything cold in the larder?"

"Yes. Cold lamb, sir."

"Thank goodness."

Meantime baby had been sustaining a peevish cry. Jackson took him up to the bedroom and began pacing the floor, roughly kicking aside the things with which it was littered.

"What shall I sing, old man?" he asked, as if he expected the infant to reply.

Baby cried a little louder.

"All right, all right. Here goes."

Jackson was not musical, and one tune to him was very like another. But he remembered some nursery rhymes of his childhood, one or two of his wife's baby songs, the refrains of "Two Lovely Black Eyes" and "Dolly Gray," and the first verse of the National Anthem. And he did his best. By eleven o'clock baby's complaint had sunk to a mere muttering, and the bottle, which had been kept warm under the blankets, was applied with the most satisfactory results. Baby finished it and fell asleep.

Baby's father went downstairs for something to eat, after which he sought the easy-chair, lit his pipe, and dropped into a doze.

He was roused by the voice of Jane, and went sleepily towards her door.

"Please, sir, baby's been crying for ages."

He bolted upstairs.

Baby was roaring with rage, and it was some time ere the distracted father's efforts were rewarded. Then, quite suddenly the puckered face smoothed and beamed in an angelic smile, as if with generous pardon for the parent's gross neglect.

"Hooray!" cried Jackson, overjoyed. "Now, old man, sit there and play with daddy's watch till daddy gets into bed."

Daddy got into bed in quick time to the tune of baby's chuckles.

"Now, old man, daddy will put out the candle, and we'll go to sleep."

Out went the candle and out came a burst of infantile disapproval. Something fell with a crack on the floor.

"Holy Moses, my watch!" groaned Jackson, and lit the candle again.

Baby beamed.

"Now, my boy," said Jackson firmly, when he had

recovered his watch, which had stopped, "you've got to go to sleep. No more nonsense!" Baby chuckled. . . .

Two hours later Jackson put out the candle.

Half an hour later he lit it again. Baby was moaning and wriggling in obvious discomfort. Jackson was touched.

"Perhaps, old man, I'd better take off your clothes, after all. You must be feeling wretched. I wonder where your night things are." He found them at last, and a fearful struggle ensued. Baby wanted clothes off, but not clothes on. Jackson began to feel as if his brain were giving way. At last he got on sufficient garments, some upside down, including a pelisse, to prevent the child's catching cold. It was now daylight. He tried more singing. But baby desired to kick and play and chuckle, and did so till near five o'clock.

Both slept till seven, when baby did his best to declare himself ravenous. Jackson warmed a meal over a spirit lamp, which he discovered after vainly consuming the heat of seven tapers and a bit of candle. The meal made baby as bright as the proverbial button—so long as he was not left to himself.

Jackson, giving up the idea of making tea, prepared a breakfast of cold lamb and water. He had no appetite, and felt fagged beyond description. He would not risk changing baby's clothes again. How he got through the long morning he could never afterwards tell.

The doctor came at eleven, just as baby, after a long fit of fractiousness, dropped asleep.

"I'm half crazy," said Jackson, when they had talked a little.

"No wonder. Your wife will be dreadfully cut up about losing her train last night."

Jackson suddenly wondered if she would, really. She had lost her train so often before. In his wearied, topsy-turvy brain the idea came into being that she required a lesson. He imagined he saw her stepping from the train, sweet, fresh, apologetically smiling; he imagined her making prettily exaggerated protestations of sorrow and wild promises for the future. He wondered how he could teach her a lesson out of his own discomfort. He did not believe she had suffered much during the night spent at her mother's. Doubtless he misjudged her there, but he was too fagged and feverish to look at any side of the question save his own.

"If you like to go to meet Mrs. Jackson," said the doctor, "I'll stay here till you come back. I daresay I can manage baby if he wakens. The train is due."

"Thank you, but I'll take baby with me. Please wait. I may want to see you presently."

The doctor smiled as he saw the father and son pass the window. The latter looked a most disreputable infant.

"It'll give her a lesson," laughed the doctor.

.

Lucy stepped from the train, smiling a little shamefacedly, but ready with a real wifely greeting. At sight of her child, however, her face changed.

In consternation she began—"Oh, Billy, how—how——"

Mr. Jackson grinned vacantly, and murmured—

"How doth the little busy bee
Improve the shining hour,
And——"

"Billy! What has happened to baby?" she cried.

Her husband went on grinning. "Baby?" he repeated—

"Why, Baby, Baby Bunting
Set the cat a-hunting
To gather honey all the day,
And snapped off——"

Mrs. Jackson stared at her husband. "What are you saying? Don't sing——"

"Sing a song of sixpence,
A rocket full of pie,
Four and twenty blackbirds
Coming through the——"

"Billy! For heaven's sake, hush!"

"Hush-a-bye, baby,
On the tree top!
When——"

Lucy was now pale. "Give me baby, and come home at once," she whispered imploringly.

"Come home, dear father,
Come home to us now,
The cow jumped over the clock,
The little dog laughed
When the old man died,
Hickory-dickory-dock!"

She could not get him to stop. Smiling fatuously, he walked with her to the cottage, humming jumbled rhymes all the way.

.

"My dear madam, there is no need to distress yourself," said the doctor to the shivering Lucy, a little later. "I have given your husband a powder, and after a good sleep he will be himself again. The trying experience of the past twenty-four hours on an

already tired brain accounts for the slight temporary mental derangement. It was a pity," added the doctor gravely, with a twinkle in his eye—"a great pity you lost the train."

"I'll never miss a train again," sobbed Lucy. "I'll make a point of catching the one before it."

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